ONCE IN THE SADDLE

BY EUGENE MANLOVE RHODES

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ONCE IN THE SADDLE

By Eugene Manlove Rhodes

To readers far removed from the Southwest, Rhodes's stories are romantic; but in New Mexico they are known as uncompromisingly realistic. In fact the realism is so penetrating that at least one prominent resident still avows his purpose to shoot the author on sight. No one could ask for a more convincing tribute!

'Once in the Saddle' is a dramatic story of an attempt to force a small ranch-owner to give up his holdings. The story of Pinky Ford's death and Pliny Mullin's revenge is an epic of the old new West. 'Pasó por Aquí,' which is also included in the book, is a most exciting account of the wild adventures and hairbreadth escapes of Ross McEwen, who robbed a bank and fought bitterly to escape the mounted posse that trailed him.

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BY EUGENE MANLOVE RHODES

The Riverside Press Cambridge

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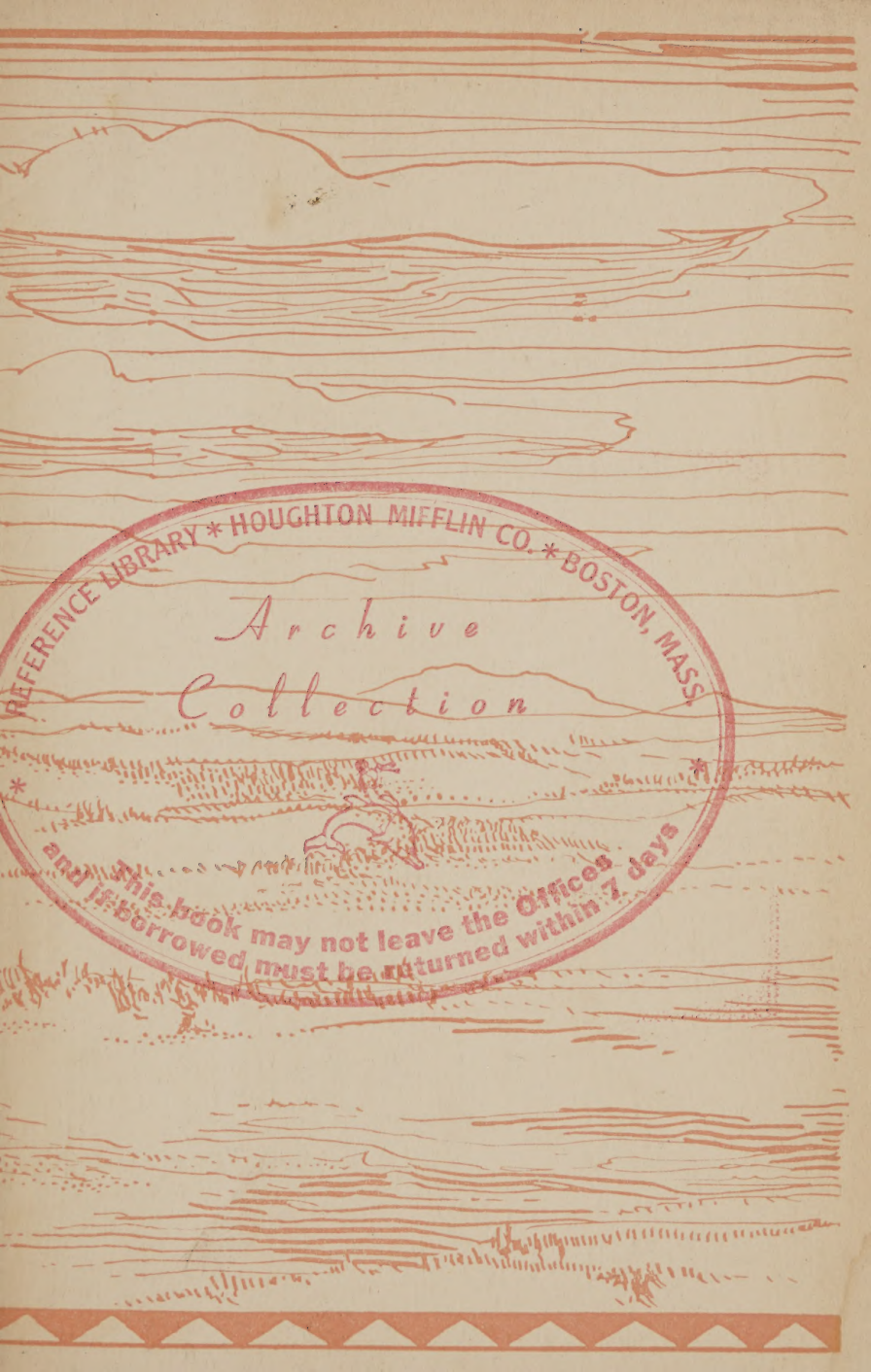
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AND

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BY

EUGENE MANLOVE RHODES

Author of 'Stepsons of Light'
'Copper Streak Trail'
'Good Men and True,' etc.

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TO

OLIVE FULLERTON CAREY

DISTINGUISHED OTHERIST

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ONCE IN THE SADDLE

CHAPTER I

'SHE told me,' said Tommy, 'that she was a wedded wife. Have another drink.'

'No, thanks. It's noon — past — nearly one. What say we walk up and have a bite? You feel better then. After all, it's a real nice little old world. You don't have to depend on my say-so. Take a look and see if it ain't.'

Tommy took a look; he took another drink.

'Oh, yes, it'll do,' he conceded, less bitterly. 'All the same ——' He stowed the bottle in a pocket and shook his head sadly. 'Come on then, let's eat.'

In plain disproof of bookish superstitions, the world in question was saucer-shaped for all to see. At the saucer's edge, heaven-high and dream-far, wavered a sheen of many-colored mountains, not inartistic, even by the standards of Europe.

From all the encircling hills the curving slopes of Purgatory Plain, drought-stricken now and grim, dipped to the midway flats, the Sinks of Purgatory. Westward from the Sinks, just where the last gray slope merged with the level, green Salamanca gleamed and sparkled in the sun.

Salamanca town on Tórmes River! A tiny river, hoarded by ditch and flume for checkerboard orchards and fields of Madrigal and Salamanca. Love gave these names a century since, with Yeltes and Bravamonte, in memory of Old Spain; faith planted that bright wilderness of greenwood; hope found a road through the tangle of wild hills for that planting and that founding. Salamanca was well begun.

Looking intently, you saw faint scratch and scar on ridge and hill rib, where the great Trans-Continental clambered and inched through Purgatory in a painful short cut to the Pacific; but the T.-C. had not changed those old names. Something, if not a soul, moved

vaguely in that huge body to forbid; directors of that day were content with the immortality of a side track.

Between walls of crumbling adobes and under cool arches of old *alamos*, the two strolled dinnerward down a Salamanca street, timing their steps to tinkle of elfin waterfalls in the *acequia* beside them. One man was eager, impatient, angry; the other joyful. Twenty miles away, near the Webb coal fields, the angry man was now drilling a well for the joyful man. Tommy Garrett was the angry one. Tommy wore the first clean-shaven face in Purgatory and owned the first well-drilling outfit in Purgatory. He had ridden in to report that unknown prowlers had attempted to dynamite that drilling outfit the night before. These tidings, in part, accounted for Tommy's annoyance; but in no way explained the serenity of Pliny Mullins, the joyous one. Both men were young, slender, wiry, shortish; but Tommy was fair-haired, with a fair, clear skin, while the other was red-headed and berry-brown,

with a mustache brindled, thick, soft, exuberant and vivacious. One horn of this mustache, the horn nearest Tommy, now drooped with Tommy's grief, but the other horn perked jauntily to heaven with some private inward satisfaction.

Far up the green tunnel, an automobile rounded a corner in a flurry of dust and came toward them. Before store and saloon, 'tied loose' with dangling reins, saddled and slumbering horses woke to panic effort, jumping walls to garden or orchard, or shouldering into open doors of what market places their respective riders affected. Our two pedestrians pricked up their ears, their previous high converse forgotten. This fixes the time with accuracy; horses were not wonted to automobiles then — nor were their riders.

The car turned a corner.

'Welladay, alack, and perhaps gadzooks! I didn't know any of those things ever got here. You people been improving the roads?'

'No; they've been improving the cars,' said

Tommy. Tommy's fresh young face smoothed briefly with its interest; then it clouded again. 'Some few can get through the Hot Gates from the county seat. That's old Malloch himself, I judge, feeling around to do you more dirt. You speak up, Mr. Mullins. I've only known you two weeks. Declare yourself, white man! Are you going to let this lulu bird wipe his feet on you or are you going to fight back? I want to know what kind of a gink I'm working for. Yes, I know Malloch owns stores and ranches and banks and this and that, hither and there and yonder, and the coal fields and the county seat — and nigh all the county administration except that old hard-headed sheriff man. Yes, yes; but he don't own me, by gravy! And I'm plumb curious how about you. What you aim to do, fight or crawfish?'

'Fight,' said Pliny Mullins. 'You do it. Get you a guy with gun and a black dog and have 'em stand night guard on your little old derrick for the present. Always willing to fight or frolic. I'll be studyin' to rig up some sort of

contrivance, later. But just now, you see, I'm plumb busy.'

'Yes, you are!' sniffed his earnest employe. 'Busy at what?'

'Well, for one thing, soon after dinner I aim to carry a pat of butter and some nice warm cakes to my poor old grandmother, up there.'

Mr. Mullins jerked his chin to indicate the second story of a building just ahead. The first story was occupied with Jake Henry's saloon. Tommy sniffed again.

'It sure takes all sorts to make a world,' he said. 'Now if somebody had handed me the dose you got last night, no poker game would hold me — no, sir! I'd go camp right with that well till it got drilled, that's what I'd do!'

'Now, now, be reasonable,' remonstrated his employer. 'Them lads are scared — nearly caught, and you shooting at 'em, and all. They're not going to try anything to-night, nor yet a while for a whole mess of nights. You know it. Here, let's eat with your namesake.'

They turned into a restaurant whose front made the simple announcement,

PTOMAINE TOMMY

Salamanca had eaten early; only a few tables were in use. Mullins led the way to a little alcove separated by the width of the room from the nearest occupied table. A brisk waiter came to take their order; close on his heels came a tall young man, who pulled out a chair opposite the two friends.

'Be all right if I eat here?' he inquired.

'Sure,' said Pliny Mullins. 'Help yourself.' He rose, Tommy with him, and went back into the main dining-room. 'George,' said Pliny to the waiter, 'we'll eat at this table, I guess.'

The waiter flushed. 'My name is Andy,' he said.

The tall young man followed from the alcove, thunder on his brow. 'I came in here to make you a business proposition and you spring a ranakaboo play like that on me. What you tryin' to do — work up a cheap rep as a bad

man? I'm surprised at you, Mr. Mullins — I am so.'

'Listen, fellow!' said Pliny. 'You're going to be surprised a heap worse if you pester me any.' Tommy Garrett regarded his employer with warm approval. 'I've moved once to get away from you,' said Pliny, 'and I won't move twice for any man on earth.'

'I don't understand the big idea for going off half-cocked like that,' said the newcomer. 'You don't even know me.'

'Oh, yes, I do,' said Pliny. 'You're Cal Pelly, boss of the Circle M and one of old Malloch's trained seals. Some of your bunch came sneaking around my well at Webb last night, trying to blow it up with giant powder. I don't eat with such trash.'

'I'll give you my word that I never so much as heard of it until you told me,' said Pelly. 'Neither has Malloch — and I can prove it. True enough, he doesn't want you or anybody else drilling wells at Webb, and you can't blame him for that.'

'Well, I can,' declared Pliny, 'and I do. Government land, open to entry. I'll drill there if I want to — and I want to. What Malloch wants and what he gets are two different things.'

'Yes, but listen! Malloch had no finger in any dynamite play. He ain't the kind to do a trick like that. He don't believe in violence, ever. Him and me, we talked this over; and if you want to ranch it, I'll put you onto a lay that beats anything you'll find around Webb or anywhere else on Purgatory Plain. That's fair, ain't it? Don't you think it would look better if you'd listen to reason instead of makin' these grandstand plays?'

'I'm backing up any plays I make, so don't you fret about that,' said Pliny. 'You just forget my grandstand plays and go on with your errand. Sit down; let's hear what you got to say.'

Tommy rose and tapped the table; his eyes narrowed.

'Now, if you think, I'm going to eat with you, Mr. John C. Calhoun Pelly, you got another

guess. It was Mullins's well your gang tried to blow up, but it was my drilling outfit, remember. Smoothin' it over with Mullins ain't going to make no difference to me a-tall. You don't fool me one little bit. If it wasn't you, it was some of your gang.'

'Clam yourself, Tommy, clam yourself!' said Mullins. 'Of course it was some of his gang. Pelly ain't denying that. Peaceable chap, Pelly. . . . George, we won't want dinner right now.'

'My name is not George. My name is Andy.' Andy's eyes snapped.

'Yes? Well, you come back after a while. We're going to talk a little business.'

'There's two of you,' said Pelly, 'and I got no gun. And I don't lay claim to be any bad man ——'

'Yes, yes, that's clear enough.'

'—— or a gunman. So if it gives you any pleasure to insult me, go to it! But let me tell you that it is most mighty little to your credit.'

Pliny smiled warmly.

'Do you know, if I thought any man was insulting me, I wouldn't talk business with him. No, sir! I'd do business with him — that's what! But you please yourself.'

Pelly hesitated, his handsome face red and white by turns.

'You're a hard man to deal with, Mullins. Well, here's the lay: As I said, Malloch don't want anybody settling near the coal mines. He makes no bones about that. No reason why they should, anyhow — not after this drought, with grass down to the roots, dried up and blown away. But out in the Rueda Mountains, beyond the Circle M, there's a nice place you can take up — plenty water and a piece of country the drought didn't hit very hard — pretty good grass. And you could lease to the Circle M for five years at a good price — say, five hundred a year — whilst you was proving up. 'Course, I'm not saying anything about selling after you prove up. You got to swear you haven't made any such arrangement. After you once get a patent, you can do as you

please; but you got a perfect right to lease right away. What say? Nice place, purty country; beats the sand flats all to thunder, not to mention bucking the strongest man in the territory.'

'You mustn't mind that,' Pliny murmured, amiably. 'My father's was like that.'

'Heh? What was that! I didn't quite get it.'

'My eyes,' explained Pliny. 'Them being green that way. It don't mean anything. I'm not nearly so big a fool as you think I am. Drought everywhere, you with a big brand of cattle and no feed, telling me where I can take up water near you, with good grass — does that sound like sense? And you wishin' I'd choke every minute you was telling me, too. S'pose I don't know such a place would be located within sixty seconds if there wasn't a catch to it? Somebody's ranch you want jumped, eh? Me pulling chestnuts out of the fire for the Circle M? Yes, yes, likely! Or going up against some good guy who'd snuff me out — and serve me damn well right!' Pliny

rose, jerked at the buckle of his gun belt and handed belt and gun to Tommy Garrett. 'Put my gun behind the desk, Tommy, and stay there yourself.' He stepped over to the wide central aisle and turned to Pelly. 'Now, pinto man, put me to jumping claims for you, will you? You yellow hound! Come on, guy — do your stuff!'

Pelly was ten years younger than Mullins, twenty pounds heavier. He plunged forward, head down, face shielded with his left arm, his right swinging wildly. Pliny slipped aside, leaned far to the right, stuck out his left foot and tripped his charging antagonist. Pelly dived headlong to the floor, face down, and slid on with the impetus of his own rush. Pliny leaped after, threw himself in the air, twisting, and came crashing straddlewise on Pelly's back, his face toward Pelly's feet, his feet toward Pelly's head; his left foot slipped under Pelly's right arm. Pliny sat back on his foe's shoulders; he reached swiftly and assisted his own left foot to hook up over the back of Pelly's

neck, the boot's toe curling snugly under the foeman's chin. Just in time; before this adjustment was completed, Pelly was beginning to get his breath again, which he had lacked for a space after Pliny's flying mount. He struggled almost to hands and knees in an effort to dislodge his rider. Pliny threw all his weight violently to his right and at the same time struck sharply on his foe's left forearm. Pelly's burdened head went to the floor again. Pliny reached both hands to his own right foot and tugged frantically at his high-heeled, high-topped boot in an effort to pull it off.

'Keep your seats, gentlemen!' cried a musical voice. This was Andrew-called-George, admonishing the guests. 'Keep your seats, everybody! These gentlemen are having a difference of opinion. Everything's all right — and I hope they both break their necks!'

This wish seemed in a fair way to be gratified. Pliny's mount plunged and heaved, striving to twist his head from the gripping foot. Pliny was forced to tangle his left hand in his

enemy's hair to assist the foot to hold the half-Nelson, leaving his right hand, unaided, trying to pull off his boot — fortunately loosened while both hands were on the job. Pelly drew his knees under him; he was on hands and knees; almost to his feet. Pliny swooped in perilous arcs — to right, to left, forward, back — as Pelly strained and struggled; the boot came off at last.

'Now, pinto,' said Mullins, 'the hour has come!' He grabbed the boot above the instep and brought the heel down sharply on the bone of Pelly's right elbow. Pelly yelped and that side gave way. The boot heel crashed on the crazy bone of the other elbow. Pelly groaned and collapsed, face and feet to the floor, the rest a quivering triangle. Pliny took the boot in both hands, by heel and toe. 'Pinto man,' he said, 'this is going to hurt you worse than it does me!' He brought the boot leg down on the straining apex of the triangle. . . .

'Feller,' said Tommy Garrett, 'you claim to be Little Red Riding Hood, but you act like

a wolf to me. Be that as it may, ain't that maybe ample?'

Pliny desisted from his labors and looked up, bright-eyed. He had been forced to twist his left hand in Pelly's hair again, so furious had been the struggles of that hapless one, and he had been plying the boot with his right hand alone; sweat rolled down his face and his breath came jerkily.

'You — think — he's — got plenty?' he gasped.

'I'm practically sure of it,' said Tommy. 'Besides, you haven't been having much exercise lately. You'll overdo.'

'Maybe-so you're right, at that.'

Pliny uncurled his leg from the cruel half-Nelson; he walked up the aisle and sat down; turning his back to his humiliated victim, he pulled on his boot.

'He's gone,' announced Tommy. 'Don't blame you for being ashamed to look him in the face. That's no way to do any man. He'd a heap rather you'd shot him.'

'George,' said Pliny, 'you might bring us that dinner now.'

The alleged George swung jauntily down the aisle; he whisked off his apron and tossed it to a chair; he pushed his hair back from his eyes.

'My name is not George,' he announced crisply. 'My name is Andy — Andrew Jackson. Get that?'

Pliny regarded Andy with grave and earnest attention. Then his eye lit up with enthusiastic recognition.

'I get it,' said Pliny. 'You mean, your name is Andy? To be sure. Stupid of me. Well, Andy, how about a little snack to eat?'

CHAPTER II

MR. PLINY MULLINS inspected the three cards of his draw with patient resignation. Lifting up his eyes, he became aware, beyond the open doorway, of a newcomer with a smile that faded as he paused on the sunny threshold. Leaning hand and shoulder against the door jamb, he regarded Mr. Mullins with stony eyes.

Mr. Mullins — What-Next Mullins — stole one startled glance through his lashes at the frozen face in the doorway; he licked his lips, faltered, blinked, glanced furtively to right and left at his table mates, and spoke in a husky whisper:

'Do you see what I see?'

Jake Henry followed the accusing hand of Mr. Mullins to the baleful figure in the doorway.

'Why, I don't see nothing a-tall,' he stated. 'Any of you boys notice anything unusual?'

The boys glanced out indifferently across the burning desert and shook their heads.

'Same old Purgatory, that's all,' said Bud Faulkner.

'Well, then,' said Jake, 'does anybody see this?' He flipped red chips into the pot — three — five — seven. 'Oh, say ten bones. Let everybody in.'

But Pliny Mullins threw his hand into the discard, pushed his stacks over to the banker and rose up joyfully.

'Recess!' he declared. 'All convicts are hereby pardoned, all debts are canceled and the whole durned territory takes one drink on me.' He fell upon the man in the doorway, now grinning from ear to ear. 'Why, you mizzable old horned toad, where have you been all this time?' This, with handclasp and boisterous smiting of mutual backs.

'Right considerable fuss about that triflin' no-account Lafe Yancey, if you should ask me,' grumbled the dealer. He sniffed with a sour and virtuous expression.

'You blamed old fool!' cried Yancey. 'Nice question to ask me, when you went and

stepped into the next room ten years ago, and no one ever saw hide nor hair of you again. What's the big idea, hey?'

'Oh, that? I was hindered,' said Mullins. 'You come up and sit on my hotel gallery with me and I'll tell you about it. So long, boys.'

The boys gazed after their retreating forms. The banker picked up the deck.

'Still and all,' he observed, 'they make a sprightly pair. Yet, mind you, since he struck these parts, Lafe Yancey never once said ary word about any Mullins, none whatever.'

'Pair?' echoed Bud. 'Humph! Knowing Yancey well, and taking a long running guess on Mullins, what I say is, Pair, hell! That's no pair — that's a crowd!'

'When I mention drought, what I mean is — well, drought,' explained Pliny Mullins, sitting with his friend in the shaded balcony of the Kit Carson House. 'Dry spell. Disagreeable. Our most violent rainy spells are mistook for droughts by distinguished visitors, frequent.

But this one was a regular old blinger. Grass all parched and shriveled up and blowed away — except grama, of course, and that was gnawed down to the roots. I had mesquite brush in the foothills, and it made a heavy crop of beans. Always does when there's a drought. Humph! And dagger stalks bloom heaviest in dry years, too, so cattle can eat them. Curiouser and curiouser! I wonder ——'

Wondering, his eye followed the short streets of Salamanca, in front, to left, to right, green arched and magical, and saw, beyond each street, besieging, all around and all about, the overwhelming red plains of Purgatory desert and the circle of dim mountains far away. There have been prayers less grateful than that unvoiced wonder.

'And so she came, in her splendid beauty,' prompted Yancey, in a mim-mouthed patter, 'and brought a glory to his life such as ——'

'Huh? Oh, shut up, you salamander!' snapped Mullins, thus recalled from meditation upon the unending miracle. 'You haven't

got no more soul than a road lizard. Now, lemme see.'

'You were narrating about your alleged drought,' said Yancey.

'Oh, yes. Well, I didn't actually lose much stuff, myself, what with mesquite and soapweed blossoms and all; but it throwed a big scare into me, and I sold out on a falling market. Then I went to Phœnix — and there was a big game on.

'Well, I studied right smart. My idea was to go back to old Palo Pinto and settle down. I'm thirty-two years old, for all my tender and girlish beauty. Nevertheless and yet, this Phœnix game looked plumb soft and easy to me. So I separated my wealth. Nine parts I put in the hotel safe, sacred to Palo Pinto and my respectable old age; and with one tenth I sits in to try that easy game one whirl — no more, no less.

'That was sure one deceivin' game. I never held so many big hands or filled so many on the draw. But when I had 'em no one stayed,

and when they stayed I didn't have 'em. My stake lasted just two hours. Then I begun playing 'em right up against my diaphragm, allowin' to get even and quit. Well, you know how it is.'

Lafe Yancey yawned elaborately.

'Yes, I know how it is. You lost every cent, and served you damn well right. You plumb disgust me.'

'Somebody told you,' protested Pliny. 'You never guessed. Nobody could. It took them just a week to get my roll. Somebody told you.'

'No,' said Lafe, 'nobody told me nawthin'. Some people learn from experience, tha's all. And some don't. I'm not nigh as old as you are, Pliny — scarce thirty. But I've learned more sense than that.'

'How many times have you learned that, Lafe?'

'Four,' said Lafe.

'Listen, Lafe, you ain't heard nothing yet. I then went out and sold my Epidemic hawse and my saddle and went back. 'Course, I

knew I couldn't win — no chance of that — but I wanted to finish the job. Never was any hand for halfway measures. Though, that's what I am—old P. Thorough Mullins. Well, I lingered along ten days more. But I was plumb lenient and lib'ral with 'em. Gave 'em back the capital building and the road fund, rented out most of my farms to the original owners on good easy terms, done the same with my ranches and cattle, and gave a big farewell dance and barbecue to my tenants. Then, in the warm pink dawn, says I to myself, "Well, what next?" And so I forked old Epidemic and came away.

'Ten days, Lafayette — ten days, and never lost a bet! Why, one time I drew to the six and eight of diamonds and made an ace full! Man, it was just shameful!'

'I thought you were going back to Palo Pinto,' observed Lafe coldly.

'I am, I am! Don't hurry me so! But I couldn't go off and leave Epidemic, could I? Founder of the industry, from my first frugal

struggles, midnight oil, toiling while my companions slept? No, sir! Old P. Grateful Mullins doesn't forget his humble beginnings. I'm young yet. Palo Pinto will stay right where it is, and old Epidemic and me will make it presently. Plenty of time. Who wants to begin being respectable at my age, anyhow?'

'This is not the road to Palo Pinto,' observed Lafe.

'It is a little to one side,' confessed Pliny. 'But I thought I'd drop around this way and see my old pardner, Jimmy Day. You know him — DAY brand?'

Pliny's hands were behind his head, his chair tilted back, his booted feet on the balcony rail; he pointed with chin and eyes up the eastern street to where, far beyond and above Purgatory Plain, a high round pass showed between two mountains, round and blue at noon, round and golden now as night drew nearer.

'In Rueda Hills; south of that pass somewhere. You ought to know.'

'Sure I know. Rainy Day. But Rainy's

not there any more. Gave his ranch to his nephew and pulled his freight. Gone. *Se fué. Muy lejos.*'

'How come?'

'A sad story,' said Lafe with a leaden voice. 'A love affair that turned out badly.'

'What?' Pliny stared. 'You don't mean to tell me that Jim Day was fool enough to git up and leave because some fool girl jilted him!'

Lafe turned his face away.

'Worse than that, Pliny — worse than that. She married him!'

Mr. Mullins glared at his companion. He rose and leaned over the balcony rail.

'Hi!' he yelped sharply. On the porch below, a chair-warmer turned a startled face up to him. 'Want to do me a favor? Yes? Well, go in and tell the barkeep to send two stiff whiskies up here, and to put arsenic in one of 'em. Take one yourself.' He sat down again. 'And young Mrs. D., she made him go back to San Antone?'

'Sedalia,' said Lafe sadly. 'Big farm —

Rainy! Oh, yes, he pitched and bawled, but he had to take the iron. When they ship from here they wire ahead so he can go down to K. C. and buy him a bunch of feeders from Purgatory. Poor old guy! *Se acabo. Concluido.* Feenish!' Glancing at his friend, he saw that Pliny's eyes, filmed with calculation, turned eastward to that far-away gap in La Rueda Mountains, golden no longer, but fiery-flaming in the red light of sunset. 'Fair sir and mister, come out of it! You're going into the silence again!'

'Don't bother me. I'm thinking. Not used to it,' snapped Mullins fretfully. 'Thinking — and remembering — poor old Herbie Smith — that played on a bunch of keys down in Hillsboro. Now I've almost got a key — if I only had a lock for it. Or else the other way. . . . Here come our drinks.'

Duly tipped, glasses and bearer departed.

'What do you mean — lock and key?' demanded Lafe.

'What I mean is, lock — lock and key.

This way.' Pliny turned hand and wrist to illustrate. 'To unlock things and look-see. For instance, this ranch of Jimmy Day's, is it any good?'

'About the only grass left anywhere around Purgatory Plain. Not so very much water, and Rainy always nursed the range, anyhow. Shipped the stuff when he got about so many; shipped old cows and off-colored ones. So does Pinky Ford — that's his nephew. Know him?'

'Not yet. Nurses the range, does he? H-m-m! Old P. Wise Ford. Well, I'm sorry not to see old Jimmy Day again; but that wasn't my only reason for coming to Salamanca. You see, I heard you Purgatory boys had a good liberal game, and I thought——'

'Sure you did!' interrupted Yancey indignantly. 'That's the sort of a thing you natchelly would think. *You* won't go to Palo Pinto. You'll go broke in a poker game, that's what. Bet you what you dare you do!'

But Pliny put the challenge by.

'Dear little cinch player!' he murmured, musing fondly. 'Old L. Surething Yancey! Whatcha take me for — a sucker?'

'You always was a stubborn, pig-headed chucklebrain, and I reckon you always will be,' said Lafe bitterly.

'Not pig-headed,' protested Pliny, shaking the head in question. 'No, no; firm, tenacious — papa's persevering pet. Yet, still, and notwithstanding, I might get a hand beat some time. It has happened. Such being the case, eftsoons, right now, to-night, me and Epidemic will hie ourselves to yonder Rueda Hills and see can we maybe buy half or all of that Pinky Ford ranch and stock, if it is as good as you tell it.'

'But why to-night?'

'Cool,' said Pliny. 'Ride in the cool. Hot in daytime.'

'Yes, yes, simpleton! But why to-night? Why not to-morrow night?'

'Well,' said Pliny, considering, 'I've done told you my story, and I don't want to have

to listen to yours. I'm pulling out soon after supper.'

A voice floated up from the street.

'Mr. Pliny Mullins?'

'Present or accounted for.' Pliny looked down from the balcony. 'Mr. Malloch, isn't it?'

'It is. I wish to speak to you. Will you come down?'

'Why, yes, I will if you insist. But it's pleasant and quiet up here. Wouldn't you rather come up?'

'I'll be up,' said Malloch.

CHAPTER III

'THIS way, sir.' The clerk of the Kit Carson House ushered Mr. Malloch to the balcony and withdrew.

Mr. Malloch was a stalwart, big-boned man of some sixty years, or fifty, with iron-gray hair, cold blue eyes, a face firm-fleshed and unlined by any scars of laughter — a face which terminated in a battleship jaw. Under another sky that face would have been high-colored. Even now there was a ruddy glow through the sun stain. He wore a pepper-and-salt mustache, close-clipped in a manner unusual and striking in that time and place.

'Which of you two is Mullins?' he demanded stiffly.

'I'm the bird. This is Lafe Yancey. Take a chair and tell us what's on your mind.'

'Mr. Mullins, I would like to speak to you privately.'

Mullins shook his head, smiling amiably.

'Can't be done. Advice of counsel. Lafe and me, we use the same toothpick. You go right on and say your piece.'

Three heavy wrinkles ridged upon Malloch's forehead.

'Very well, sir.' He waved his hand with a swift impatience, brushing Yancey aside as immaterial. 'I want to know what your idea is for drilling a well at Webb.'

'Water,' said Pliny sweetly. 'Oodles of water there. Shallow, too. Hundred feet or so, I judge. I'm a water sharp. Know the lay of the country. Water between lime and sandstone there, like it was in a pipe, oozing down from Gavilán Hills.'

'That is foolish talk. The cowmen won't stand for any more stock here.'

'The range won't stand it,' said Pliny. 'Purgatory Plain is done ruined now. Take five years of good rain to make cow country again. Shucks, think I don't know nothing? I'm not ranching. Fixin' me up a town site. Aim to sink a lot of wells on my hundred and

sixty. Build houses to rent, start a store 'n' everything.'

Malloch's heavy face tinged with red streaks, the flush of a hard, controlled anger; a deep cleft throbbed between his tensed eyebrows, his nose dented, his jaw set, his lips parting a moment to disclose strong white teeth set like a vise.

'Just as I thought — a hold-up! I'll break you, young fellow! You'll curse the day you ever came to Purgatory! No man can blackmail me!'

'Grandmother, what makes your teeth so white?' The query ended with a rising intonation, and Pliny's eyes grew wide with artless wonder to match the childish accents, fearful, yet curious. 'And your ears are furry and your nose is pointed. *Grandmother!*'

Grandmother gritted his white teeth.

'I'll fix your clock, you blackmailer! You wait!'

'I could make you marry me for that,' observed Pliny, with narrowing eyes. He put

his booted feet on the balcony rail, balancing his chair on its hind legs; he thrust his hands in his trousers pocket. 'Feller,' he said, 'you're the poorest guesser I ever did see. When I offer to sell, call me a blackmailer. When I take money from you, call me a hold-up. What I'm going to do is to build a town on a town site. I aimed to do just that all along. And besides,' said Pliny, 'you talk sort of large and bigetty, like you was somebody. You make duty a plumb pleasure.'

'If it's money you're after, you can't make any that way. But if I bought you out ——'

'You can't. You ain't got money enough.'

'—— you could agree to leave Purgatory Plain.'

'Yes, I could; but I won't. Man, you don't seem to have any confidence in my word. But why should you? Just one measly minute ago, no man could hold you up — and now you're fair achin' to force your money on me. You keep it and eat it. Me, I'm going to build an addition to Webb and give the Hunkies a

look at a decent house for a fair price. And how're you going to stop me? Signed, J. Pliny Mullins. Witness, Lafayette Yancey.'

'But the miners can't buy or rent your houses. They've got to rent company houses.'

'Eggs-actly,' said Pliny. 'That's how come. I don't like them harsh words, "got to." A real sure-enough man doesn't have to do anything except maybe to die, and I think that last is only people in the papers. You see, I didn't follow the big main road in here. I come across lots, over the Gavilán Range, looked down and saw the smoke of your tame train of cars goin' out to your little old coal mines, so I made a bee-line for there. And I laid over two or more days, old Epidemic being leg-weary and me bein' plumb interested and curious. Them Bohunks or Polacks or what not, they treated me fine — they did so. And they sung first-rate, too. I liked their singing. Not near enough singing in these here United States — not enough poor singing, let alone good singing. The darkies, they sing

fine; and the Mexicans, they sing pretty blame good; and the cowboys sing just as bad as can be, and they all sing pretty copious; but them Hunkies of yours, they sing splendid.'

Pliny paused, twisting his mustache thoughtfully.

'Hell and damnation!' breathed Malloch, with startled sincerity.

'Yes-sir, best I ever heard. They had a lot of right nice kids, too,' said Pliny. 'So I thought it would be a bright idea to give them something to sing about, for they sure had one rotten lay. They had to rent the company houses at company prices; they had to buy from the company store, bum stuff at an ungodly price; they had to get their picks and drills sharpened by the company blacksmith at a bit a point, when they could do it themselves for next to nothing; they had to go to the company doctor; and they had to take the company's say-so for the weight of their coal, not being allowed no lookout. All that stuff is out of date, old dear. I saw all that done in

Kansas, up no'th of Baxter Springs, when I was a six-year-old — and I saw it stop short, never to go again. So says I to me, "Pliny, old hand, here's where you hear history repeat herself some, you holdin' the prompt book."'

'You meddlesome fool! Fat chance you've got to run my business for me!' snarled Malloch, glowering behind bristling and bushy brows.

'Dearie, you never were so bad mistaken in all your life — and your life's been all one long mistake, from all I hear about you,' said Pliny. 'Never mind, I'll correct you.'

'You'll correct nothing! I'll run you out of the country! Pup!'

'Of course, I could tip off the unions and let them do it,' continued Pliny in a placid drawl. 'Your Hunyaks don't savvy unions, of course. That's why you imported 'em. Mexicans wouldn't stand such foolishness, not one holy minute. But unions are most half as bad as the owners, anyhow; and they wouldn't do the job the way I want it. They'd make you

cut out your graft, of course; but I'm going to fix that town over so them little kids I seen will have homes and a white man's chance. Keep still now! I'm talking! To begin with, you built your town in the sand — no kind of a place a-tall, and a clean pleasant mesa right there beside you. Not one tree and you with plenty water. Shame on you! And then miserable box houses, and them not even painted. A lumber house is no good in this country. Take adobe now, it's cool in summer and warm in winter. But, of course, the first cost is a little higher, so you sling up your cursed, warped, rattletrap board shacks.'

'While you were prying around and poking your long nose into other people's business, did you happen to go into the mines?' demanded Malloch sternly, pointing a strong and stubby finger at his tormentor.

Pliny Mullins brought his feet back to the floor and sat up.

'Yes, I did.'

'Now you're so shrewd and know so hell-

ish much — did you notice anything in the mines?'

'Yes, I did too.' A new note crept into Pliny's voice, and for the first time he eyed his enemy with respect. 'The timbering was good — damn good — and the ventilation.'

Malloch's eye glittered with triumph; he smote his chair arm with a heavy hand.

'You stubborn jackass, there has never been one life lost in the Webb coal mines, I'd have you know! I put in the best possible timbering and the best safety appliances ingenuity and experience have devised. You fool, I sacrifice half my profit to safeguard human life. This is the most up-to-date mine in the West. And you come blatting around with your puling sentimentality about trees and flower gardens!'

'Right as rain — right twice. You did a man's job on the safety stunt — and I never once thought about flower gardens,' admitted Mullins. 'Flower gardens goes, and thank you too. There's quite some few cedars on the

mesa now, and I'll set out cottonwood saplings just as fast as I can get water to them. A few houses first, low rent, a little store, and a baseball ground. Oh, I say, Mr. Malloch, that school-teacher of yours is a yellow cur,' said Pliny. 'I handed him a damn good licking the first time he gave me a reasonable excuse. Where was I? Oh, yes, the Mullins addition to Webb. A few good houses and trees and flower gardens. Later, a few more, as the money trickles in. Little drops of water, little grains of dirt make adobe mud, and so on. Just a matter of time.'

'Likely! And every man that moved in your houses would lose his job! You talk like a fool.'

'You don't understand,' said Mullins kindly. 'Public opinion would be with me — wouldn't you, Yancey?'

'Well, I hadn't thought about it much,' said Lafe, clearing his throat judicially. 'Now you call my attention to it, I probably would at that; though I feel bound to say that so far I haven't worried much about no Hunyaks.'

'But the kids, Lafe? Remember Alan Hightower's little girl on the Mangas — Little Josie? Just ten, she was, when we buried her. Lafe, there's a little trick over in Webb City that's a dead ringer for Josie Hightower. You goin' to fold your hands over your belly, or are you goin' to come a-snuffin' and see to it that them kids get all the chance there is?'

'I'm comin' a-snuffin,' said Lafe promptly. 'You go on with your posy gardens. Me and the boys, we'll make it a point to see that America expands far enough to take in Webb City. Now you go right on with your talk, gentlemen. Don't mind me. You interest me strangely.'

'I done bought three or four old broke-down cow ponies, gentle and safe, and a couple of burros, and give 'em to Webb City — all the kids, turn about,' mused Pliny, smiling into his red mustache. He turned brightly to the capitalist. 'You see, Mr. Malloch? The movement for a bigger and better Webb is going through, and the only way in God's green earth

you can stop it is to do it yourself, and I wouldn't trust you no further than I could throw a bull by the tail. So I'll just do it my own self, my heirs, executors and assigns. Lafe's them, and Tommy Garrett. However, if you want to clean up on your own hook — strictly under our supervision and direction, of course — to save your face ——'

'I'll see you in hell first!'

'You'll be having apoplexy one of these days. You take strychnine, feller. Your heart is bad. Strychnine is what you need. . . . Well, then, I'll go on with my townlet myself. Don't blame me if the company gets a black eye. I done give you your chance and you turned it down.'

'And your motive? You're not expecting to make a good thing for yourself, naturally,' sneered Malloch. 'Just principle? The square deal, the great tradition — all that sort of rot? High-minded redresser of wrong, dispenser of justice?'

'Let us hope it will be that,' agreed Pliny.

'Just that kind of rot exactly. You see, it's like this: My dad, he was a red-hot Southerner, and all that. Always stuck to it that he couldn't stand a damn Yank; but way down in his heart he was a rock-bound malignant old Puritan. And he gave me mighty sound and thorough religious instruction. "Pliny," he says, "you always do the next thing next," he says to me. "Do it good, and do it hard, and do it now," he says. "Maybe there won't be any day after to-morrow, not ever; but to-day's right here. So what you got to do, you do it right off." And I done so ever since.

'So that's what I'm going to do about Webb, and you can't help yourself. You can't buy me and you can't break me and you can't bend me. I've got no property you can hornswoggle me out of and you haven't got anything that I want. I'm not borrowing money of you, so you can't cow me with any little book of horrible dates. All you can do is to get me killed, maybe, and you'll find few that want the job.'

Malloch leaped up, surprisingly light on his feet for so heavy a man.

'You cursed ill-mannered whelp, do I look like a murderer?'

Pliny hesitated.

'It's getting on toward dusk,' he said. 'The light is tolerable poor right now. I — I really wouldn't like to say.'

'Well, I can tell you,' growled Malloch. 'I know a dozen men I can hang. I have only to crook my finger to have you snuffed out — insolent dog that you are! But I have no lot or part in shedding man's blood. Human life is sacred to me. But you — you are a potential murderer, ready and willing to kill at a second's notice. And you dare to throw it up to me that I — that I look after my own interests — drive sharp bargains, perhaps.'

'"Sharp bargains" is one way to put it,' says Pliny. 'I have heard it rumored about that you are a damnable old hog. Let that go. But if I am such a bad man as you say, aren't you a leetle mite rash to talk so uppity to me?'

'I'm not afraid of you,' said Malloch stoutly; 'not one bit; nor of any of your highbinders.'

'Well, sir,' said Pliny, 'I don't believe you are, at that. Such being the case, we know where we stand. You've got twelve men you can hang and I have a friend I can trust. Kind of one-sided, ain't it? But you're a stubborn brute, and I reckon you'll keep on, even with the odds so heavy against you.'

'Stubborn? Why, you long-eared mule——'

Malloch's indignation drove him to sputtering incoherence and Mullins blandly continued his summing up.

'Stubbornness and trickery on your side, manly resolution and violence on mine. I am to understand that if I am shot in the back, it will be without your foreknowledge and O.K. — is that it? For my part, I'm giving notice that any gentleman playing tricks on me has got to be slick enough to fool me. If I catch him at it, his tricky days are over. You pass the word to your twelve friends that deserve hanging. And if you send any of them pro-

jectin' around me, pick those you can spare best.'

'Mr. Mullins,' said Malloch bitterly, 'you certainly have a choice idea of how to make yourself disagreeable. You are the most exasperating man I ever knew, the most hateful and disrespectful.'

'Now, now,' interrupted Pliny, 'what cause have you given me to respect you? You send some of your twelve tools to blow up my well ——'

'I didn't,' protested Malloch. 'I didn't even hear of it till Pelly told me.'

'Yes, maybe. But it was done to pleasure you. Pinto Pelly will know who it was. Did Pinto tell you about the little talk I had with him this afternoon? That reminds me. You'd better let Pinto noise it about that Tommy Garrett is strictly on the prod, and that any person hereafter snooping around that drilling outfit will run into a little hell like mother used to make. It is highly important to get that word to your disciples, right off.'

'I tell you again, that was none of my contriving. And I don't hire murder done, and I didn't threaten it, either. I was angry, and I only pointed out how easy it would be to get rid of you if I was your kind.'

'Yes? My kind — meanin'?'

'Gunmen, killers,' said Malloch firmly. 'You and your kind have no respect for human life.'

'I pack a gun, yes, and I know how to use it. So does Yancey here. And we both know there's more important things than for us to keep on living. That doesn't make us killers. That makes us poor people to crowd. If men like us was miners, you wouldn't even try to pull that stuff you're getting away with out to Webb. If everybody was as easy as them poor devils, this would be a fine country for your kind — meaning stinkers — but it wouldn't be America. Smart people don't crowd the likes of us, not because we are honing to kill, but because we are willing to die sooner than put up with any foolishness. But if we do kill

any one, we'll do it ourselves — we won't send. Listen now — listen hard! Do you see no difference between killing with a gun and killing with a gunman? Shucks! You and your dirty dozen!'

'That is no kind of talk,' said Malloch sternly. 'No kind of talk at all. You are unjust, and you know it. You make it hard for me, an older man and a known man, trying to withdraw a hasty and ill-said word spoken in anger to a man young and unknown.'

'There, there, you'll know me better before you get done with me,' said Pliny consolingly. 'All you have to do is to let me have my own way and a child can manage me. But when you sent Pinto Pelly to bribe me, to buy me off — me, old P. Probity Mullins — am I supposed to respect you for that?'

'You know, you are doing more than your share of the talking,' said Malloch. 'And you're talking about me. That's what makes you feel so virtuous. Let's talk about you awhile. Young fellow, you're doing consid-

erable posing and strutting and admiring yourself. Sure you're not overlooking anything? You made some mention of the children at Webb, I think. When you get your West Webb town to working, is it your intention to start a saloon and a gambling-hell, so it will be easy for those kids to follow in your footsteps? When they learn that you are a common poker fiend, then what are you going to say?'

'Huh!' said Pliny. 'Jesso! Well, now, Mr. Malloch, sir, I reckon I won't say anything. There ain't nothing to say.'

'He'll say, "Well, anyhow, I didn't cheat,"' said loyal Yancey.

'No, I won't, Lafe. I won't say one word. Why, Mr. Malloch, you get better and better. I couldn't leave Purgatory now, a-tall. First I wanted to do something for Webb and now I want to see what can be done about you. You interest me. First you make your mine safe, like you said. Then you don't approve of killing folks when they need it — and just now

you showed that you had brains. But if you've got sense, what makes you act so? Why, I've got to stay here! If you'd associate less with your twelve friends and pick you out a decent enemy or two, it might be the making of you.'

'Sir, you are a stubborn fellow.'

'So Yancey was telling me when you came. There must be something to it,' said Pliny. 'And you're not stubborn? Is that it? You're sure one interesting citizen, Mr. Malloch. Why, if you behave yourself, I believe maybe we'll let you be one of the boys, after a while. But if you don't be good — well, when they let this territory in as a state, we'll nicely send you to the Senate.'

'I've heard enough of your talk,' said Malloch, rising. 'You make me sick.'

'Hey, wait a minute, can't you? It's getting dark and time to eat; but I've got something else to tell you. Looky, Mr. Malloch, you and me could make each other walk pretty straight if we didn't get too friendly. Like now. I'm going to keep you from doing a dirty trick

this very night. You see, Pinto Pelly, before I pressed his pants, he tried to buy me off from this Webb lay by giving me the chance to jump some poor devil's ranch that you wanted and was willing to pay for; jumpable on some technicality or other — I didn't wait to hear. Pinto tell you about it? No? Well, it's like I say. So I'm going to hunt up that ranch and tell the owner what you aim to do — start soon after supper. Pinto didn't say where it was, but he said there was good grass. So it oughtn't to be hard to find.'

'Only grass around here is at the old Rainy Day ranch,' observed Lafe. 'But I always understood that Rainy got a patent.'

'Just what I figured,' said Pliny; 'hearing how it joins on the Circle M range, good grass, Day out of the country and a smooth-faced kid holdin' down the place. Reckon old Rainy missed a bet somewhere. You rest easy, Mr. Malloch. If there's any flaw in Rainy Day's title, we'll fix it up. You won't get no chance for any shenanigan. You are now just begin-

ning to lead a blameless life. What? Going? Well, good-night.'

'I hope you break your damned neck,' said Malloch.

CHAPTER IV

PLINY MULLINS woke in a dry and dewless dawn. The mountains were far and very small; low along the east a pearly brightness sparkled, rayed and deepened to a glow of rose, arrowed with leaping red.

Pliny drew on his boots, resumed coat and hat, which had served, respectively, for covering and pillow, shook the saddle blanket which had been his bed, and led in Epidemic, who was staked to a near-by soapweed. The stars paled swiftly.

Brown Epidemic wore an injured expression, not without reason. Pliny had hoped to ride as far as good grass before making camp, but at two by the clock in the sky — say, thirty miles out from Salamanca — had found the grass still short and scanty, poor pickings compared to the toothsome alfalfa of Salamanca. Pliny had made camp none the less; two in the morning is the low ebb of vitality, hard hours

for horse or man. Hence Epidemic's dismal and reproachful eye and the martyr droop of his neck.

Pliny took a hearty swig from a cloth-covered canteen, rolled a cigarette, saddled and pushed on, following a dim trail which led toward the landmarks of Lafe Yancey's directions. Day grew broad, the mountains took on their wonted shape and size once more, fencing away the rumored far-off world. Rabbits scampered across the trail; a bunch of quail whirred up and piped indignant signals behind him. Pliny looked back. Far away and far below, Salamanca huddled in the shadow, a dim and shapeless blur; the first smoke of its chimneys rose straight in the windless air. Then red morning flamed over the eastern ramparts, the deep valley flooded with rolling light, the blur that was Salamanca became a bright oasis, green and glorious, far-seen across the golden day.

Rueda Peak, hub of Rueda Mountain, Wheel Mountain, was eastward now. Pliny's way lay

to the south in a rim-like circling of the far-flung spokes of Wheel Mountain. The sun was high and hot when he came to the foothills. He found good grass there, dry but succulent, cured on the stem, grama and crow's-foot; better still, the low mesquite bushes were heavy with long bean pods, yellow and red, richer feed than corn. Pliny waited here, fortunate, wealthy, and grateful, for a long hour while the martyred Epidemic broke his fast; then, whistling, took the trail again.

Near the tip of a southernmost spoke of Wheel Mountain a wagon road wound between scattered outlying cedar clumps, climbing a gentle slope to a deep-notched saddle in the hills. Cantle and saddle skirts were blue black with a heavy growth of cedar and piñon; but the horn of that saddle was a knob of bare gray limestone, half a mile long, or near it, its gray crest a hundred yards above the pass.

Brown Epidemic breasted the slope in a brisk swinging walk. He had seen a few cattle, streaks of red and white through cedar brush;

the trails were fresh traveled, and then this new-found wagon road —— Oh, they would find water presently! At the top of the pass he twitched his ears, with a low and murmured whinny. Pliny, tiptoe in the stirrups for the first glimpse of the broad country beyond the pass, turned his eyes northward to follow those pointing ears. A team and wagon, just starting, came down the sidelong stony slopes of the saddle-horn hill; behind them, a pile of freshly cut cedar poles told of the business in hand. Pliny drew rein.

As he left the bare rock and came into the soft ground the driver threw off the brake and flourished his hand in salute. He drew to a halt beside the horseman; a young man, scarcely more than a boy, bright-faced and eager. Elbow to saddle horn, chin in hand, Pliny surveyed him gravely; he nodded sagely.

'That's a right bright idea — a fine idea. Fencin' that hill to keep cattle off so they won't starve — is that it?'

The youth grinned largely.

'Not much, *señor don.* I aim to catch my drinkin'-water off that hill, and I'm fencin' cattle away from a chunk to make sure the water's clean enough to drink.'

Pliny rubbed his chin, plainly puzzled.

'But with the grass knee-high here — and with what I've been told — why, the Day ranch must be ten miles yet. Why drinking-water?'

The young man laughed frankly.

'You old-timers are all alike,' he said. 'Sweetwater Spring is way deep in the hills; the Day ranch, just like you say. Sure the grass is knee-high here. That's why I aim to live here; and, by gravy, I aim to keep it knee-deep, or near it. Buildin' a tank in the draw to furnish water for stock, cistern in the hillside for the house. Man, I'm goin' to have the best ranch in the whole round world! I'm Matt Ford. Meet me. I'm Rainy Day's nephew, and I bake good bread. C'me on down and I'll show you. Say, did you come from Yeltes, and did you bring my mail?'

'No — I'm from Salamanca. I'm Pliny

Mullins, and I'm an old friend of Rainy's. Over on the Mangas River, twenty years ago.'

'I've heard of you. What-Next Mullins. Yes, indeedy. Glad to meet you. You come on and we'll eat. You made dry camp last night, of course?'

'Shucks, I can wait till noon,' said Pliny. 'But my horse needs water. Got any for him, or do I have to go on to the spring?'

'Plenty water. You come on to camp.'

Behind the hill, sheltered from the prevailing southwest winds, the house faced eastward over a wide and wandering valley, parked by low cedared knolls like islets in a lake; flanked by wooded ridges, leading up to a broad pass with a massive peak on either side. Beyond the pass the long wavy crest of a red range, now near, now receding, outlined and defined open country at the summit, between the double ranges, the red one and the black.

The two-roomed, flat-roofed house was built of fragrant cedar, hewed at need for closer

fitting and chinked with mud. There was a fireplace, broad and deep; the roof of the kitchen was of split cedar, laid in herringbone pattern on peeled *vigas* of piñon; the roof of the combined bedroom and living-room was of peeled yucca stalks, herringboned again. Door frames, window frames were of hewn cedar joined with careful workmanship; only the doors and floors were of lumber. Before the house, at one corner, stood a patriarchal juniper with a magnificent spread of branches; below the other corner was a little cluster of cedars, young, thrifty, and graceful; through the opening between, as through a casement, the house looked forth upon a fair and gracious world. Under the broad shade of the juniper were two wagons, one of which held four water barrels; beyond, a small pen confined two brockle-faced milk-pen calves. Four horses loitered on the near and shaded hillside, and brown Epidemic grazed toward them. Under the cedars young Ford and his guest lolled on a tarp for an after-dinner smoke.

'Pretty good layout you got,' said Mullins approvingly. 'Don't know as I ever see one much nicer. Did you plan it all out yourself?'

'Oh, no. Uncle Jim planned it, mostly. I just filled in here and there, where he'd overlooked a bet. Of course, I'm just beginning, yet. Take me five years to get it all rigged up the way I want it. He always aimed to build a tank here sometime, but he never got around to it. Kept him busy down at the spring building corrals and a horse pasture and house and all. He's got a right good house down there. But he had this in mind for the home ranch all along, knowin' that, no matter how careful you are, the grass gets mighty short around permanent water after a while. He had a long head, Uncle Jim did. Never would let himself get overstocked like the rest of 'em does.'

'That's why you've got good grass.'

'Mostly, but not altogether. You see, we've never been bothered with other people's stock. Only the one spring. Nobody ever found water digging wells, and they tried aplenty. Except

on the north, it's so far to the next water that cattle never drift in on us. Almost like living on an island. Up north, the nearest Circle M well is only thirty miles. But Uncle Jim turned the Circle M stuff back in the rainy seasons till he got tired of it. Then he threw up a drift fence across the narrows ten miles from the summit. It was strictly against the law, I reckon. But it held the cattle.'

'I reckon the Circle M would like to own this place,' suggested Pliny.

'Them? Sure! Malloch offered to buy me out at a pretty stiff figure — all it's worth, I reckon. But what would I want to sell for, at any price? I'd rather be right here than anywheres.' Ford looked out across his fair domain with a sparkling eye. 'He wanted to lease, too, on account of the drought this last year, but I wouldn't. 'Twarn't like he stood to lose much. He's got a good ranch up in Colorado. All he had to do was to ship. I want to keep this range just like it is, good as it ever was. Once the Circle M stuff got wonted here,

you couldn't ever keep 'em out again. Some few climbs in over the hills once in a while, but I shove 'em back quick, you bet you.'

'How long did it take you to fix this up so far?'

'Two years now. Hauled water for my teams from the home place while I built my little tank.' Pinky nodded at the dam which impounded a small body of water, heavily fenced, in the valley below, where Mullins had watered brown Epidemic before unsaddling. 'Since then I've only hauled for house use. Now I've got my cistern blasted out and cemented up to catch clean water from the hill, and if it ever rains again, I won't have to haul any more. Got a fine filter made. Charcoal and sand. Take you over after a while and show you. Then I built my house and started in on the big tank.'

Pinky turned his head to glance proudly at his masterpiece half a mile down the valley; a red earthen embankment, looming massive beyond a deep barrow pit in a wide semicircle,

which, when completed, would dam the flood waters to a respectable lake.

'Didn't let the range cattle use the water in my little dam. They was mighty indignant about it. Just used it for my teams and saddle stock and two or three milch cows. Good thing, too, else I'd ha' been left high and dry. She's sure dwindlin' — that water hole. Only about two feet left. Gosh, I do wish it would rain!'

'How long has this dry spell lasted?' asked Pliny.

'Fifteen months — rising of that. Even so, it rained here since it did on the flat. Lookin' for it any day now. She almost made the riffle only last week — and here comes a big wind and blows it all away.'

'But you didn't do all this alone?'

'Oh, no. Had a mighty good Mex boy helping me — Melquiades. But last spring he got married on me,' said Ford dolefully. 'He was a go-getter. We kept chickens then, and he had a mighty nice dog. But you can't keep hens and a dog on a one-man ranch, and him

gone a heap — round-ups, and so on. I tried out two or three more boys, but they was so plumb ornery they just aggravated me. And the Americans around here, they don't like to work, only horseback — durn fools!'

Pliny nodded.

'Yes, I know. I work that way. She's some job — that dam. And you've got a lot to do yet.'

'About two thirds done,' said Pinky. 'There's a year's work in it now — more. Of course, I don't work all the time — early mornings and late in the evening during our eleven months of summer-time. And naturally I got to be gone some, working the stock.'

'Son, you're overlooking one big bet,' observed Pliny. 'You ought to put you up a stack of hay. I know what horses is. If you'll count up you'll find that you put in about two solid months out of every twelve hunting up your horses in the morning — don't you now?'

Pinky's face fell; he was one who liked to do things the best way.

'I don't know but you're right,' he admitted.

'Sure I'm right,' said Pliny. 'Grass being good here, it isn't so bad as it might be. Most places a feller puts in purty nigh half his brief and fleeting life just wrangling horses.'

Pinky sat up and scratched his head. This was a new idea to him.

'Say, Mr. Mullins,' he inquired earnestly, 'how long does it take a man to put up ten or twelve ton of hay? And was it grama grass you cut?'

'Who, me?' said Pliny. 'I never cut any hay! I wrangle 'em, same as you do!'

'Humph! Might 'a' known it!' said Ford. 'You old-timers is all alike. You know a few things plumb good, inside and out. And then you won't ever learn anything new.'

'Right you are. And that brings me to what I came out here to tell you.' Pliny roused up and sat tailorwise on his feet; he rolled a cigarette and considered his boyish host narrowly. 'Son, I reckon I've got some pretty bad news for you — I do so.'

'Not Uncle Jim?' said the boy quickly.

'No, not that. Nothing but what we can set straight.'

'Spill it!' said Pinky.

'Well, in a way — Jim being an old-timer, like you said — it is about Jim. Here it is, short and sweet: Your Uncle Jim proved up on his spring, they tell me.'

'Sweetwater? Oh, yes, long ago.'

'Homesteaded, of course? Yes? You don't happen to have the papers here, do you — his patent from the Government?'

'No, they're in the bank at Albuquerque, along with his deed to me.'

Pliny nodded.

'Well, son, old Jimmy pulled a bone somewhere, and I think I've got it ciphered out. Anyhow, me bein' a stranger here, it was put up to me that his ranch was jumpable, and I was asked to do it. They didn't know I'd ever so much as heard of Jim. So I thought I'd come out and put you next.'

Pinky's brow darkened.

'The Circle M?'

'Sure! Who else should it be? It wasn't old Malloch himself, but he was knowing to it. Here, I'll give you the layout.'

He told the story of Pelly's offer, the motive for it, and the outcome.

'And this is the only place that fits in with his story,' he concluded. 'So it simmers down to one of two things. Either they wanted to toll me out here where they could kill me convenient, or else your uncle made some kind of a slip-up when he patented his place. Malloch he claims he don't hold with killing, and some way I believe him. I don't like one hair of his head, but he's got points — Malloch. On the other hand, he'd do any dirty trick for money — anything the law would back him up in doing — and naturally he judges other people by himself, same as we all do. He wanted me out of the way at Webb and he thought this would turn the trick. So I guess Rainy's ranch is jumpable all right.'

'But how? He's made his final proof and got his papers. How can it be jumped?'

'I've studied on this till I was black in the face, Mr. Ford,' said Mullins. 'There isn't but one way for it to happen. Jim has got muddled up on the surveyor's markings on his corner stone. He was an old-timer, and that kind knows a few things right from the ground up, but they never learn anything else. You said a mouthful there. So Jimmy has went and homesteaded his water hole, lived on it, made his improvements and proved up — but his title deeds will be calling for another piece of ground, alongside. You'll see.'

'It doesn't seem possible,' said Ford.

'There ain't nothing else possible. I tell you, I've been thinking my damnedest on this proposition, and that's the only answer. You know this corner stone, just where it is — the one with the section number on it?'

Pinky stared.

'I know every stone in these hills, and every soapweed,' he said, 'and all the lizards except the younger set. Why, gee whiz, man, what do you think I'm doing with my eyes — readin' books?'

'All right, then, we'll saddle up and go see. Do you happen to remember the section numbers on that patent?'

'Sure! The Northwest one fourth of Section Eight, Range Three east ——'

'Never mind the rest,' interrupted Pliny. 'When we go to that stone and cipher out the marks you'll find that your description calls for the hundred and sixty right next to the place Jimmy wanted. I reckon he let his mind wander just at the one important minute; studyin' about drawin' the joker to a bobtail flush, or the last girl he seen in the settlements, likely.'

'Let's drive down,' said Ford. 'I've got to haul up drinking water anyhow. You can hobble your horse while I get my team.'

'You want paper and a pencil,' advised Pliny as they harnessed up. 'If I'm right, as I always am, you want to put some kind of location papers on that spring this very day, with me for one witness and some trusty man for another. How about Lafe Yancey?'

'Lafe'll stand hitched,' said Pinky. 'Any

lies he tells, he'll stick to 'em. Couldn't get a better witness pro tem. All the same, next time I go to Yeltes after grub I'll bring me out a real witness to sign up, just to make it more binding. But won't the land office straighten that out, Mr. Mullins — seein' Uncle Jim was actin' in good faith all along? Looks like they might. They could cancel the first papers and give him title to his own land that he wanted.'

'That's good sense, but I don't know about the law,' Mullins answered. 'I never heard much about law being sensible. You might try, and, of course, Jim Day will want to do just that, bigger'n a wolf. But in the meantime, kid, you want to nail your claim to that water this very day. Jumping your own place — that's something new too. Have you put up any notice on your dam yet?'

'No; I intended to homestead it. But I figured that if anybody looked right close they'd notice that I was living here, without any paper.'

'You'll have to desert-claim the dam, I

guess,' said Pliny, 'and homestead the spring — in case Jimmy can't get the land office to amend the record.'

'I guess that will be the way,' said Ford regretfully. 'But I did want this place for a homestead and a home. And it will be awkward, too, living at the springs and leaving all that good grass. But I couldn't desert-claim the spring. That's in the roughs where I couldn't make good on the ploughing part. But the tank — why, I aimed to have me a little old orchard below the dam anyway.' He brightened up, planning anew. 'No trouble to prove up on a desert claim there. All I'd have to do would be to fence off a level strip of that made ground and put in a patch of alfalfa — and millet, maybe. How is it — five acres in crops for every forty claimed? Humph! I'd have to have ten acres fenced. One forty wouldn't cover the house and tank both. There, let's go.'

'Lordy, I don't know about desert claims,' said Pliny as he climbed into the wagon. He

smiled across at the driver. 'Son, you don't seem very much cast down, do you? And this is quite some mix-up for a boy, too.'

'Oh, boy here and boy there! I attained my majority,' stated Pinky pridefully, 'at the ripe age of twelve years, and I've been doin' a man's work ever since. So I reckon I can make to bear up for a few stanzas. Been ruined once, too, and I can't see where it did me any great harm. When dad died he left me a nice little bunch of mares. I fell to, working like a major, and built 'em up till I had five or six hundred head. And then, what with electricity and what all, the bottom dropped out. For six thousand years horses had been good safe property — till I got me a mess of 'em. Then they went kerflooey overnight and I was left holdin' the sack. Went to bed wealthy and got up broke. . . . Hey! Do you see that, Mr. Mullins — that thunderhead peeping up over Black Mountain? Golly, I do believe it's going to rain at last! Smell the air? Man, but won't the cattle be tickled, and everybody?'

They came to the summit, where the watershed drained three ways, to the southeast, to the north, and down the westering slope they had climbed from the dam. They turned southward down a plunging valley between the hills, a valley that narrowed to a draw, to a deep curving détour; the road took to the hillsides on man-made cuts and grades; so came at last to Sweetwater Spring. They tied the team and climbed the wild hillside to the corner stone.

Far below, Sweetwater lay between gray and red. The hill to south and west was warm cinnabar, banded with cedar thickets; the massive and mightier slope to northward, cliff-crowned, was bastion to a wild gray range of crags and splintered pinnacles. It was a breathless and forbidding steep they climbed, gaunt and bare and gray, bristling with serried spears of *sotol*, tangled with rock-born briers, cactus, *ocatillo*, and a thousand thorn-bearers.

The stone stood upright, a sturdy slab of limestone, its base firmly wedged between other stones set flatwise in a pit and well

tamped down. Already the wilderness was closing in upon it; a brown greasewood branched around it, a tall *sotol* leaned above it, a dagger crowded at its base, a prickly pear reached thorny arms toward it. Pliny shoved aside the greasewood and pointed. On the southeast side was a lightly chiseled record, R 3 E S 8.

'Range Three east, Section Eight,' interpreted Pliny. 'Jesso. And here' — he bent to look at the southwest side — 'S 7 — Section Seven. Never mind the two other sides. They tell about Sections Five and Six, behind us, and the township number.'

'Township Twelve south — I remember that from the papers,' said Pinky. 'And?'

Pliny stood up and faced the south. Under them, on his right hand as he stood, the strong corrals of Sweetwater Ranch, looped about by the deep graveled wash, filled all the narrow level between hill and hill; on the hill slope beyond, overlooking the corrals, the house peered through a clearing of evergreens. Below the

ranch the cañon plunged headlong, twisting to dark mysterious depths between higher tangled mountains in the east. Pliny extended his hand as in benediction over the silent ranch.

'There,' he remarked, 'is the Northeast one fourth of Section Seven. Nice little place, spring and improvements, all wide open for location.' He looked to the left, up the thorny and matted steeps, where armies of *sotol* hung threatening above them. 'And up here — son, it sure looks like your Uncle Jim had done gypped you. This is your estate — the Northwest one fourth of Section Eight.'

Pinky Ford straddled on a drift of loose stones, pushed his battered hat to the back of his head, cocked a bright eye along that gashed and grim hillside, and surveyed his holdings without enthusiasm; he waved his hand hospitably toward the prickly pear.

'Sit down,' he said. 'Make yourself at home.'

CHAPTER V

'You eat your own beef, I see,' remarked Pliny at the supper table.

'Yes,' said Ford apologetically. 'Uncle Jim he said that was the best way.'

'Some do,' said Pliny.

'Yes, but how could you tell? Is my fair young face so pure and eloquent as all that?'

Pliny poured himself a cup of steaming coffee; he broke a hot biscuit and reached for the bowl of jerky.

'Far from it. I pounded up the jerky to make this gravy, and it was tough and stringy. Fat tender yearlin's is what you kill when they're other people's stuff.'

'This was an old mossback,' confessed Pinky. 'Five-year-old steer that I never could get when I wanted to sell him. It's so far to Yeltes that we never ship except in the rainy season — and then there's water in the rocks everywhere. Then this old coot and half a dozen

more would hide out up on Hardscrabble. Trying to start a wild bunch on me. I'm goin' to beef 'em all. Don't want no wild cattle in the DAY brand.'

'How many cows do you run? We didn't see many to-day.'

'Oh, about five hundred. No, they're mostly in the big roughs below Sweetwater. The deer, too. On the steep north hillsides where the sun don't dry it out, the grass has got considerable life to it yet. Nothing much up this way but the tender-footed ones and right old ones, and a few that's willin' to travel twelve miles from water to get at them mesquite beans you saw down on the aidge of the plain.'

'Wouldn't sell a half interest, ranch and brand, spot cash, to the right man — if I was him?' asked Pliny.

'Why, I reckon not,' said the boy, 'Not now anyhow. Got all the money I need. Money wouldn't be any particular use to me. Look now, you mustn't think I don't appreciate what you just did for me — or rather for Uncle

Jim. But you act mainly like a bachelor to me. Are you married?'

'What few girls I've ever met have all been right sensible,' said Pliny. 'Living out in the wilderness, they get their wits sharpened up, seems like.'

'Yeltes, now,' said Pinky — 'Yeltes is plumb civilized. And there's a girl in Yeltes ——' He paused, hesitant.

'Only one girl? I thought Yeltes was a sizable town.'

'I never saw the others,' explained Pinky. 'So if you was ever to marry, you might come back and name that trade to me again. Uncle Jim's wife — oh, yes, I suppose she's my aunt; but, gosh, I hated to see him leave! Uncle Jim's wife she claimed it was lonesome here. Of course, Lookout is sightly — that's this place, Lookout Tank — where Sweetwater is most mighty like living in a crack in a rock. But a pardner with a nice lively family would be quite different from just a poor bachelor man. You see that yourself.'

'I see. But,' said Pliny, 'either you'll have to put off the happy day for quite some time, or else that girl in Yeltes will have to put up with Sweetwater. Goin' to find it troublesome to manage your saddle horses down there too.'

'Oh, damn the saddle horses!' cried the exasperated Pinky, tangling his fingers in his mop of black hair. 'Say, I've a good mind to bend my gun over Cal Pelly's head!'

'You forget about that gun,' said Mullins. 'You've got your notice on the ranch, and the whole United States is back of you now, and Malloch or no one else can take it away from you. There was a time when a gun was the only way you could hold a ranch, but we got the law now, and that's a heap better.'

Young Ford's eye traveled slowly to the wall, where Pliny's belt and gun hung from a pair of deer antlers; he arched an eyebrow slightly.

'Yes, yes — but even old-timers can learn a little sense sometimes,' said Pliny, answering the unspoken retort. 'You, young and well-started, good rep, fine ranch, nice little bunch

of stock and that girl in Yeltes, making a silly talk about guns — tut-tut! Oh, fie! For shame! Pelly's only done you a service, anyhow ——'

'Thanks to you.'

'Thanks to me. You're welcome. You've found the flaw in your title in time to tinker it up. Now you let Pelly alone. You just forget them out-of-date ideas about shooting people whenever they don't do just to suit you. That's bad stuff, gun-play is.'

'But there's a lot that ought to be killed. You know it.'

'Now, now!' expostulated Pliny. 'You can't go running around killing everybody that needs it. Somebody's got to work the stock. You let Pelly alone. You haven't been harmed any. Got your place yet.'

'Yes, I have, and going to keep it,' said Pinky cheerfully. 'Again, thanks to you. Pelly ought to be grateful to you too. All the same, it's going to be a bore, living at Sweetwater, or going through the motions, when my

work is here and I want to live here. And keeping saddle horses down there on short grass, after the snap we've had up here — it's going to be quite a chore.'

He mixed the sour-dough sponge for the morning's bread and set it on the hearth; Pliny washed up the dishes.

'That's a pretty smooth fireplace you've got there,' said Pliny. 'Soapstone, isn't it?'

'Yes, all but the hearthstone. Hauled that soapstone seven miles, but the ledge run small stuff. Nothing nigh big enough for a hearthstone. So me and Melquiades used this big slab of sandstone, not knowin' any better. It was a whopper — just one piece, reached clear under the walls of the fireplace and out here where you see — over six foot square and maybe ten inches thick. We made a sled out of poles, crowbarred the cussed slab on the sled, hitched on the team and dragged it down here and built the fireplace right on top of it. First time we built a fire we thought there was a box of cartridges burning. When that damn

red rock got good and hot, it exploded and it kept on exploding. Splintered and broke up every time we made a fire; she shelled the place with little pieces of sharp rock — zing-g! So there I was. I didn't want to take down the fireplace, and I didn't want to lay another rock on top of that, 'cause it was just high enough. So I had to take a pick and a hammer and a gad and work out all that broken rock, back where it was busted with the fire, just leaving this part out in front for a hearthstone. Filled in the hole with 'dobe dirt. That's the only botched job in the house, too,' said Pinky regretfully.

Mullins went to the door to throw out the dishwater.

'Pshaw now, I do believe it's clearing off, after all,' he grumbled. 'And we felt two or three drops, sure and certain, as we drove back. Dear, dear!'

The boy came to the door. A few clouds, heavy and dark, hung on the far summit of Rueda Peak; overhead others, light and scat-

tered, drifted idly by; but for the most part, starshine was soft and bright across the sky.

'Looks bad, but it may rain yet,' said Pliny as he went back.

The boy lingered at the door, looking out into the night, as if to see, beyond the hills and the broad plain and the great mountain wall beyond that plain, the luring lights of Yeltes — that lit the world for him.

'Hey, Mr. Mullins, wake up! By heck, it's a-rainin' right!'

Pliny scrambled from his bunk in the dim daybreak. A thin chill was in the air. Massive black clouds banked low and level against Rueda, against Long Mountain, against the red eastern hills, hiding summits; thin tenuous streamers floated out across the dull and leaden sky, and all the valley was filled with a slanting steel-gray drizzle.

'A general storm,' pronounced the older man. 'Shoes for the baby.'

'Rainin' gold pieces,' yelped Pinky. 'Say,

one month more and half the boys would have been stony broke. Whoop-ee!' He dressed in joyous excitement and grabbed a slicker from a peg. 'You start breakfast, Mr. Mullins, while I rush out and milk the cows before it rains any harder.' He was back an instant later, thrusting a laughing face through the doorway. 'Say, look out of the window a minute. Them calves never saw a rain before, and they don't know what to make of it.'

Pliny looked. The two milk-pen calves frisked about their small enclosure, tails up, blatting uncertainly, half in pleasurable excitement, half in fear of this strange new thing; beyond the fence, the picture of complacence, the two mothers mooed reassurance to their agitated offspring.

'This is goin' to be a regular old soaker,' announced Pinky later over a steaming breakfast. ''Course, it ain't rainin' hard yet, but it's comin' steady. It's tolable dry under my front-porch juniper, and I'm going to shoe up a couple of my saddle horses. Been lettin' 'em

run barefoot, me not using 'em much, and it dry. But now their hoofs'll get all soaked up and soft so they couldn't stand no riding. And I'm sure going to be one busy *hombre*, once it clears up.'

'Branding up the calves when the cattle come up to the open country?'

'No, that'll wait. All branded up except the least ones, anyhow. First off, I have to go over on Prairie Mountain to help fight the sheep off. The Circle M will send a man. Pelly comes himself, generally.' Pinky stopped to frown at this thought. 'You see, there's a heap of sheep over east, and they pour in over Prairie Mountain — it not being rim-rocked like all the other hills here — whenever it rains, unless we're there to turn 'em back. If they'd just stay on Prairie, we wouldn't care, and we wouldn't bother 'em any. It's one mighty long, wide hill too. Nigh sixty miles around it, lots of grazing, and good grazing. Our cattle don't never use it except in the rainy season, because there's no permanent water on this side; and

when it rains we got plenty of grass of our own, and we'd just as lief our stock wouldn't use Prairie at all. I got plenty, wet or dry, myself, but I don't want sheep to get no habit of slippin' over on D A Y range. Think they'd take what they was welcome to and stop, wouldn't you? No, sir; let 'em have Prairie Mountain and they come down this side to water at Soldier's Hole; let 'em have Soldier's Hole and they drive right on to the home range. So we make the watershed the dividing line, and when they come on this side we smoke 'em.'

'Where do you bury your dead?' asked Mullins.

Ford grinned.

'They ain't never shot back yet. Nor we haven't had to shoot anyways close to them either, so far. They're real biddable. We just sort of signal to 'em a few times — so far off that they can't swear to us. Then they drag it.'

Well, now,' said Pliny, 'don't you have any words with Pinto Pelly if he comes.'

'Pinto?

'All red and white, when he's yellow,' explained Pliny. 'Don't you let on that you're wise to his little enterprise. Don't name my name to him either. He might mistrust something.'

'Oh, I won't bother him. He don't amount to much, anyhow. Old Malloch is the big hog. Pelly'll be the one to come, pretty sure. It's kind of personal, shooin' sheep. Safer to do it yourself. Hard bunch, them Circle M peelers. Pelly can't trust 'em — nobody can. If one of 'em got anything on Pelly, he'd most likely make him pony up hush money. Your friend law is tolerable severe about shooin' sheep. Claims sheep has as good a right to Uncle Sam's grass as cows. They have, too — if they can make it stick.'

'Yes,' said Pliny, 'and you'd better keep an eye on Pelly if you sight any sheep. He's yellow, but he's got a mean eye, and it's fixed on your Sweetwater place. You don't want him coming in town to report that the sheep herders shot back — and got you.'

'He's harmless,' laughed Pinky. 'He ain't got the credentials. But I'll keep my eyes open, just in case. Here's where I miss Melquiades. I'll have to turn my little old milk-pen calves loose with their mammies. No tellin' when I'll be back. And my saddle stuff and team, they'll go down to the mesquite belt and the Lord knows where. Look, Mr. Mullins, I don't suppose you care to take on for a spell of work?'

'I'd stay for accommodation if you really need me, but not for wages,' said Pliny. 'You be the judge.'

'Oh, it's not important. Just the home layout getting scattered, like I said. I've got to go to Yeltes and get me a man, anyway, soon as I get back, so as to push work on the dam while I work the cattle. Round-up's pretty quick now.'

'Me for Salamanca then. You see, I've got a man drilling a well for me,' said Pliny. 'Not only that, but there's a pay-day at Webb the fifteenth — that's day after to-morrow, ain't it? And they do say that the storekeeper at Webb

and one or two of the foremen, they drop into Salamanca soon after pay-day. So there'll be a big game on, these Webb men havin' inaccurate ideas about what's what. So when the storm breaks I'd better be riding. But how are you going to work on your dam? Your barrow pit will be full, won't it?'

'I sure hope so. But when that happens, I plan to plough out the ridge, where the spillway will be, and scrape that down into the dam. That way, in order to get enough dirt for the dam; I'll be obliged to make the spillway plenty big, whether I'm wise enough or not. I counted on that. Say, Mr. Mullins, there'll be water in my cistern already, coming off that bare rock. I'll slip over and get a few stanzas of it and we'll nicely set on a pot of *frijoles*. Can't cook beans in spring water; it's too hard. And I sure do love them Mexican strawberries.'

'I'll be bringing in the horses then; Epidemic might not let you take off the hobbles.'

'Look behind them coats in the corner and get yourself a slicker.'

Pliny went to the corner and fumbled through the miscellany that hung there — overcoats, overalls, and among other things, a saddle, and a rifle with its scabbard, swinging high against the ceiling from spikes in the *viga*.

'Extensive wardrobe you keep up,' sniffed Pliny. 'Town clothes on a stretcher, two overcoats — my, my!'

'Uncle Jim left his outfit,' said Pinky. 'So I got two of everything — two saddles, two pairs of chaps, two overcoats, rifles, slickers, everything. Keeping 'em; he might come back. And, by jings, I'll write that gentleman a letter to-night that'll make his hair curl. Wow! Him and his Section Eight!'

CHAPTER VI

BETWEEN flurries of rain Ford shod two horses all around, Mullins assisting; Dollar, a deer-legged black, and Snapdragon, a tawny dun with black-barred legs and a black stripe down his backbone. Drizzle and gusty showers swelled to a brisk and businesslike downfall. Epidemic was hobbled again, the other horses turned loose; together they made for the shelter of the cedar brakes. By noon the clouds banked low and level, the rain fell in shudders, it drenched in blinding sheets, it settled at last to a steady, merciless downpour. And yet so thirsty and spongelike was the drought-parched earth that dark was closing in before the first red muddy water came foaming down the draw to whirl and eddy in the little fenced reservoir and the great barrow pit of Lookout Tank.

But morning broke clear and golden, the warm sun kindling through a disordered rout

of clouds that streamed in broken squadrons across the east. The sky was washed and clean, the hills sparkled and shone; the valley air was thronged and swirling with music and mingled echoes, the sound of falling waters from the hills, high darting lyrics of rejoicing bird song; and through all, above all, beyond all, ubiquitous, swelling, sinking, unceasing, in rolling rhythmic hymn, the frogs thanked God.

Young Ford folded a single blanket, rolled it tightly, wrapped it in a slicker and tied the slender roll behind his saddle; he put a little bread and jerky in a flour sack and tied it to the saddle horn.

'Me and them frawgs is feelin' pretty good,' he said. 'There, I'm all organized. No, I'm not; got to wind my little old eight-day clock,' he said. 'Probably be back to-night, for I don't exactly hanker after much of Pelly's company; but you never can tell. If he comes he'll be apt to bring a pack-horse — it's more his business than mine. One good thing, I won't

have to strain my rigging acting friendly. Him and me was never more than civil the best of times. Sure you don't want to side me to Prairie Mountain, Mr. Mullins?'

'No, I'd better drift along,' said Pliny, saddling up.

'You come again any time you can,' urged the boy. 'We'll have a deer hunt — bear hunt, if you say so. Lookout is yours, as Melquiades says. You'd better take Uncle Jim's slicker, Mr. Mullins. You might need it. Long jaunt to Salamanca, and plenty liable to rain this afternoon. Now the drought is broken, we might have rain all fall.'

'I'll do that,' said Pliny, and did. He swung into the saddle. 'Well, so long, friend. See you next time.'

'So long, friend,' said Pinky. '*Hasta luego!*'

Pinky Ford rode gay and gladly, smiling, spurs a-jingle. At the summit he reined in for a backward glance over Lookout Valley, the low red ramp of the dam, the little house under the trees.

'One fine little ranch!' he said, and flung up his arm, exultant. 'Come on, Dollar.'

He turned down a long valley to the left, threaded a mazed checkerboard of red hills, crossed another and wider valley, another range of hills, and came at last to a long tawny mountain guarded by rambling cañons and long outlying ridges, winding slow and slow. This was Prairie Mountain; a low mountain in seeming, because it was long and wide and featureless, with no bold knobs or peaks on the rolling crest, no desperate steeps or cliff-crowned promontories on the twisting smooth approaches; but it was really higher than the eye-filling and fantastic neighbors whose flaunting beauties left Prairie Mountain unseen, insignificant, a wallflower among hills.

Dollar was not deceived. He climbed slowly, with frequent stops; yet halfway up he was afoam with sweat. Pinky dismounted and lit a dead *sotol* for a signal fire. A few minutes later an answering fire blazed out, higher than Pinky's resting place and four or five miles to

northward; Pelly, or another, toiled up one of the hundred ridges of Prairie Mountain. When the fire burned out, Dollar resumed the attack. They found Pelly waiting on the sidelong shelf where the cañons headed; paving-stone country, where Dollar slipped and skated on the smooth bare rock, crevice-grown with mescal and mahogany brush.

'Oh, cowboy, didn't we have one fine rain?' said Pinky.

'I'll tell a man! None too soon either. And ain't the cows just a-snuffin', though? Far as I could see, as I come up, was just long streaks of cattle, leggin' it for the high grass, away from the wells. I bet there's a thousand at Soldier's Hole right now. Some coming up here already, halfway up the hill.'

'No sheep?'

'Not a blat so far,' said Pelly. 'I hardly look for them yet. Didn't bring a pack, even. Just a snack. Let's go to the top before we eat. This is a dismal place right here.'

They climbed from that inhospitable shelf to

the grass-grown summit country, open flinty levels and little waves of rolling land, hardly more than ground swells, with here and there a thin clump of dwarfish cedars and scrub oak. Pacing slowly along the crest, they came soon upon the fresh track of a single horse heading to southward.

'Oh, they aim to come up all right,' grinned Pelly. 'Man up here scouting already this morning. Let's see where he went to.'

They followed the track to southward, deep in soft wet earth of the intervales, dim and troublesome on flinty barrens, plain where dead grass was crushed and bent, faint scratches on the devil's pavement of brown sandstone. On a high bump of ground they found a little plot of trampled earth and cropped grass, where the horse had been allowed to graze for a space; close at hand, a man's boot tracks under a little tree, with fresh and closely smoked butts of two brown-paper cigarettes. From there the horseman had turned sharply eastward, without turning to right or left; his trail

left the crest and turned down a plunging ridge on the steeper eastern side of Prairie Mountain.

'He saw our fires and went back to report signs of bad luck,' smiled Pinky. 'That'll be all for to-day.'

Pelly scowled.

'Yes, we might as well go back. But *mañana*, or day after, they'll try it again. I'll have to camp at Soldier's Hole and snipe 'em back, I guess. I'd like mighty well to send a man up and go to Salamanca myself. Big game after pay-day at the coal mines — that's to-morrow. But I reckon I'd better come myself and let the game slide. Well, let's drift.'

They recrossed the levels of summit and the bleak, unfriendly paved country; they rode slowly down a midway ridge. Not friendly, they were still pleased, in this lonesome land, to ride together as far as might be.

'Why not come over to Lookout with me to-night?' said Pinky. 'It's closer than your place.'

'No, I'll go home, I guess. I want to start some of the boys ——'

The sentence was never finished. There was a swift shock of sound, a glint of color, a crash of breaking brush, drum fire of hoofs on stone; a little bunch of cattle broke from cover, flashes of red and white hurtling through the brush. Dollar leaped to eager pursuit. Pinky leaned over Dollar's neck, laughing; he ducked under branches to this side or that, they dodged between scrub oak and mahogany, swerved from candle cactus and flaming *maguey*. Dollar gained on the fugitive; the boy's sharp eye singled out a DAY cow, a long-eared yearling that followed her; he shook out his rope. Black Dollar jumped a cat's-claw barrier, a flat stone tipped under his flying feet; he fell headlong, turning in the air. Falling beside the horse, not under him, Pinky came clear. His head struck on the corner of a sharp-edged rock; the horse slid by. Pelly was far behind. When he came up, black Dollar had scrambled to his feet, bruised and tremb-

ling; but Pinky Ford lay where he had fallen. One arm was twisted under him, his hand still held the half-made loop. Pelly leaped down, calling his name, ran to raise him. His body was limp. A gush of blood spread on the gray rock; his temple was crushed in.

'Dead! My God!' cried Pelly. 'One minute ago alive—and now! Oh, God! Killed, like that, laughing!' Shuddering, he felt the shattered temple; the boy's head lay on his knee. Tears were in Pelly's eyes and his lips were pale with pity. 'Oh, poor boy!' he sobbed. 'Poor boy!'

He loosened the clutching fingers from the rope; tenderly he lowered the limp body to the ground. He stood up, unnerved, shaking, sick; his head was a-whirl. The most lonesome place in the world. Nobody ever came here, not in a year. Just us — and the sheep herders. Could he blindfold the Dollar horse, lift the body into the saddle, tie it fast there, take it to the Circle M or the sheep herders? Find the sheep herders; they would be nearest; they would help him ——,

The lonesomest place in the world! And to-morrow, at Webb, the paymaster!

The black thought shook him. His mouth was dry, his trembling knees refused to support him. He sat down; his eyes turned through the western passes, toward Webb; and there, beside the dead man, the black thought shaped and grew:

The lonesomest spot in the world! The body would never be found. It wasn't possible. Not one chance in a million. Unless the sheep herders — in the next few days, while the crows — and even if the sheep herders found it —— Not a chance. But if they did, why, it would be for them to explain. Cowman found dead by sheepmen — that would take a lot of explaining! And the paymaster, old Tom Taylor, will come with the cash to-morrow! The Circle M boys will think I am staying with Ford at Lookout! Safe and sure!

He sat there a long time. Black Dollar

limped to Pelly's horse for sympathy; they munched the grass at their feet; they moved a little, tentatively, to reach more grass; no one objecting, they fell to busy grazing.

Pelly rose at last. His face was hardened and set. He left the dead man without a backward look. That dead man's rope, tied fast to the horn, trailed from Dollar's saddle. Pelly tied it around black Dollar's neck; riding his own horse and leading Dollar, he went back up the ridge to the paving-stone country; turned north here, where slow and cautious riding would leave almost no track or trace. When he came to the ridge Pinky Ford had climbed that morning, he tied Dollar to a tree; he rode his own horse half a mile farther on to a small hole in the rocks, holding the matter of half a barrel of rain water. He let his horse drink there and then plunged down into a deep brush covered cañon beyond, slowly, carefully, striving to leave no tracks. There, in a deep pocket of the hills, a grassy shelf among the scrub oaks, he unsaddled, hung the saddle in a tree

beyond the reach of coyotes and staked his horse in the dead gray grass. Carefully, cautiously, stepping from rock to rock, he climbed to the paving-stone country again and made his way back to Dollar. Mounting, he turned down the long slope up which Pinky Ford had ridden, alive and laughing, a few hours before.

Sweetwater? Later, perhaps. The Webb money first. Nearly twenty thousand. The body will never be found. Not a chance! Sweetwater? Maybe not. That man Day is a bad one. Better let well enough alone.

Dollar made slow work of it, limping and groaning. It was nearly sundown when Pelly reached Lookout Tank. He drove the horses down from the hill and tied dun Snapdragon, as the only one that was shod. He made a hasty supper; he took the flour sack in which Pinky had carried bread and jerky, and stored it again with whatever came to hand — jerky, scraps of bread, a chance can of corn; he sad-

dled Snapdragon and followed the Yeltes road. Once clear of the mountains, he left the wagon road, turned across the plain and rode through the night for Webb and Salamanca.

CHAPTER VII

PLINY MULLINS rose late. After the rain the Purgatory sun had been hot and drowsy; he had taken a long noon, asleep under a soapweed, and scalded; and so came late and loitering to Salamanca, with a head something a-swim from long hours of blazing sunlight, and had been glad for his bed in the Kit Carson House.

Still yawning, he looked at his watch. Eleven o'clock. Twelve hours of solid sleep. His bones ached, too, and his joints were stiff.

'Pliny, old boy,' said Pliny, 'this is certainly going to be a lesson to me, as the lad said when they hung him. But what do I learn by it? Nothing! Come on, boy, let's get shaved.'

Still yawning, he went to dinner. Carson House coffee was well brewed, a good pick-up; greatly refreshed, he joined his fellow guests on the wide cool porch for quiet talk and the luxury of shade, to breathe the deep sparkling air. A tip brought to him arrears of newspapers —

Denver, Albuquerque, El Paso. He perused them with waning interest. At two o'clock he grew restless. The poker game started at about three, usually. But sometimes it was earlier. He really ought to go out to Webb. Tommy was due to strike water soon. He shuffled and searched the papers. At about half-past two he strolled into Jake Henry's saloon.

The barkeeper was a new man, beefy and broad. He polished the bar with a towel.

'Yes?' he said as Pliny breasted the bar.

'Give me a good cigar — a Lew Wallace.' The barroom was empty. 'Jake upstairs?' asked Pliny.

'Jake? Sold out and gone. Tod Blake owns this joint now — him and me — mostly him. I'm Bill Austin — Salamanca Slim. Tod's upstairs startin' a little game. You know the way?'

'Well, yes.' Pliny went thoughtfully up the stairs, not very well pleased. Jake Henry was, to use Malloch's word, a known man. His game was square. Have to look up this new lad

and see how about it. Now, Pliny, you be careful like a fox!

His displeasure increased when he went into the poker room. He saw there two faces that he knew and did not like — Grice, of Webb, Lithpin Tham, of Webb; three faces that he did not know and did not like; only Bud Faulkner of the old friendly and familiar gang.

'Buy in, fellow,' said Bud. 'This is easy. These boys from Webb and Saragossa are pie for Salamanca. Boys, this is Mullins — Mullins, these are the boys.'

'I'm Blake,' said the new owner, rising to introduce himself. 'Pleasure to meet you.' He extended his hand. 'You've got a bundle of money in the safe that you left with Jake Henry. He turned it over to me to hold for you. Get it any time. Sit in?'

'Why, no,' said Pliny. 'Just thought I'd drop in and see the boys and look on a spell. Yesterday noon I went to sleep in the shade. Shade moved over and I didn't, so I was half

cooked before I woke up.' He turned to Grice. 'Aren't you and Tham over sort of early?'

'To-day's pay-day, if that's what you mean,' said Grice. 'But we got tired of waitin', and we're not needed much just now. Mighty little coal got out on pay-day, or the week after, for that matter. Hank'll take care of our money for us. To-morrow, or mebbe the day after, we'll go back and let Hank and Archie take a whirl. They're spinnin' good for us. Glad we came.'

Pliny watched the game in silence. He noticed that Bud, Grice, and Lithpin Tham won consistently. Such had not been their practice. After an hour he went out and wandered back to the Carson House in some discontent. Here, after a season, he encountered Lafe Yancey.

'How come Jake to pull stakes and slip off so sudden?' asked Pliny.

'Well, these fellows offered to swap him a better layout in Saragossa and gave him a nice piece of money to boot, so he took them up. Just like getting money from home.'

'Know anything about these guys?'

'Slim used to live here. He wasn't liked. Don't know anything about Blake. I don't go to Saragossa much. Got no use for the place. Ask your friend Malloch. He lives there.'

'Some way, Malloch never did seem to like me,' mused Pliny in slow wonderment. 'Say, I don't see anything of Pete or Buck Maguire or Aleck. They in town?'

'Oh, yes. But they haven't been around to the poker parlor yet. They're a little leery of Slim.'

'Well, I'll tell you what,' said Pliny. 'I'm going to give poker the go-by.'

'Me too,' said Lafe. 'I'm done playing poker.'

'Do you suppose Malloch would try to bait a trap for me?' demanded Pliny. 'Looks like small business for a man like him. He couldn't hurt me much, thimble-riggin' like that.'

'Malloch would do anything. He may have some kind of a deadfall rigged up to clean you down to the bone, for all I know.'

'Well, I'm through,' said Pliny decidedly and something peevishly. 'After supper I get me a good book with nice big print. And tomorrow, by thunder, I'm going out to my well.'

At eight that night Pliny bought his first stack. Lafe did not sit in till nearly nine. Seven is a full table; Blake gave up his seat to Lafe, as is the habit of the house. Bud Faulkner, Grice, Lithpin Tham, Yancey, Blanding, of Saragossa, Mullins, Fowler, of Saragossa, back to Bud again; so they sat.

The game went as games will; ups and downs, and always the industrious little slot for the kitty, the memory trainer. Blake, retired, sat tip-chaired and at ease, with an eye to see that the kitty had ever its just due; Salamanca Slim or his assistant brought drinks or cigars on order — cigars, mostly; the pastime of poker does not thrive upon alcohol.

Pliny won and lost, lost and won, lost and bought and won again, and then repeated that process; with the net result that he sat behind

tall stacks of expensive chips, for all of which he had paid. Bud lost and lost again, slowly and steadily; Grice won slowly, and continued to win slowly, with once in a while a speedier gait; Lithpin Tham won without effort, consistently, swiftly, painlessly, with a perpetual raking motion; shading little hands with little hands, beating big hands with bigger hands, dodging destruction, laying down to winners, calling bluffs with nice precision, making bluffs of his own that went uncalled.

'Tham's night,' said Fowler admiringly, as Tham, after drawing three cards, spread out a full house for Fowler's inspection. 'Take it away, Tham. You draw like a mustard plaster.'

Lafe won slowly, rather steadily, winning no big pots and losing none. With no spectacular play and with hands never better than middling, he was well to the good. But Fowler and Blanding, the members from Saragossa, lost steadily, lavishly, recklessly; lost by bad luck and by poor play; called the big hands and laid

down to poor ones; so that only their inept and butter-brained play kept the unlucky Faulkner in the game at all, or permitted Pliny to stay something near even. And while the Saragossas lost steadily to Grice and Yancey, and heaped donations upon Lithpin Tham, their heaviest losses were to each other — a fact privately remarked for future reference by the upper right-hand corner of Pliny's brain — the Northeast one fourth of it. Nine o'clock. Ten o'clock. Eleven.

It was somewhere between the hours last named when Lithpin Tham, for once holding the small cards against the big ones, dropped out discreetly at the beginning of a tilting match between Blanding and Fowler, and left them to fight it out. The two gentlemen raised each other until all of Blanding's chips decorated the table center, even then falling short of Fowler's last bet, that gentleman having pushed in his entire stack. Mr. Blanding produced a fat wallet and took therefrom a goodly sheaf of bills.

'Two hundred short, I was,' remarked Mr. Blanding. 'And I raise you a thousand more.'

Pliny's eyes grew round at this; the cow country plays table stakes. He looked a question at Bud Faulkner. Bud laughed and nodded.

'They play it that way here,' he said.

Fowler frowned, fingering the bills to check the amount; he felt for his coat hanging on the back of his chair, and found there a long pocket book even more heavily laden than Blanding's.

'I ought to raise you back, but I won't,' he announced. 'I'll just call that bet, and I've got you beat, too.'

'Only you're not sure of it?'

'Only I'm not sure of it,' agreed Fowler. 'Well, I called you. But if you're ashamed to show your hand, look at mine. Just a little full house — a five full.'

'That's good!' said Blanding. 'A big flush is all I've got.' He glanced around the table for sympathy. 'Now wouldn't that stagger you?' he demanded. 'Here, Sim, give me some

more checks — two or three stacks.' He picked off a layer of bills.

'Call the handsome waiter,' said the winner. 'Drinks on me.'

'Information is what I'm after,' announced Pliny. 'I never saw a poker game before where a man could play money out of his pocket unless he had declared himself first that he played so much money behind his stack on every hand. I don't understand this way of doing business.'

'House rules,' grunted the house, cigar in teeth, sizing up tall stacks for Blanding.

'Well, I'm used to table stakes and I don't like your house rules one little bit,' declared Pliny.

'Wait now, let me tell you how it works,' said Blake, pausing in his labors. 'It's exactly like table stakes, the way we play, if you want to play table stakes; and it gives you action, if action is what you're after. You're always entitled to a show-down for what you have in front of you, just like table stakes.

'If any gentleman goes down in his pocket to make a big bet, then you can go down in your pocket to call him — if you want to. Or you can raise him if you want to. But you don't have to dig up to call his side bet unless you feel like it. Just shove in what you have before you and you get a show for that.'

'If you'd been in that pot just now,' supplemented Grice smoothly, 'you havin' the best hand, but not feelin' confident enough to dig down in your jeans — well, you would have won all your money called for, and the other boys might have been betting each other till now. It wouldn't hurt you any. Don't you see?'

'I believe I do,' said Pliny. His brow wrinkled; his puzzled glance roved the table; his eye, quite expressionless, lingered on Bud's in passing; and Bud, for a casual half second, relayed the same expressionless tidings over to Lafe Yancey. 'H'm! I see!' he assented dubiously. 'But why and which and what?'

'It was this way,' explained the house: 'We

used to play table stakes up in Saragossa. And there was a lot of highflyers there — mining men, cattle buyers, and so on — they'd bet all their chips and we wouldn't let them pull their pocketbooks. Then they'd get up from the poker table, leaving their hands face down; they'd go over to another table and bet each other to a standstill on the side. Then they'd come back and turn over their hands to settle the side bets. That was a nuisance. It delayed the game and made arguments. So we made the rules this way, and it works all right.'

'H'm!' said Pliny, unconvinced. 'Looks like it would give a man a chance to flash a big roll and walk off with a lot of pots he wasn't entitled to.'

'Yes,' said Blanding jovially, 'and then again he might flash a big roll and walk home talking to himself.'

'Oh, well, let her flicker!' conceded Pliny. 'But if you've got a needle and thread behind the bar, have them brought up. I want to sew up my pocket.'

'Give us a new deck,' said Blanding.

Midnight came and went; lunch loomed in the offing.

'I wonder what's keeping Slim,' said Blake. 'He should have been here with those drinks long ago. I'll go call him.'

He rose and walked to the door. Blanding was dealer. As Yancey made the cut, Blake, near the door, dropped his cigar. He bent to pick it up, rising in time to butt his head into Slim as he came through the doorway. The tray tipped with a crash of glass; the partners exchanged confidences as to the mishap. Pliny picked up his hand. He had four tens, cold — four tens and an ace.

Pliny paused for the merest fraction of a moment. In a seven-handed game, when the first man holds winning cards, it is the accepted practice to pass for a raise. But the upper right-hand corner of Pliny's nimble brain made comment upon the coincidence of this unusual hand with the clash in the doorway, when all eyes had left the dealer. Pliny

opened the pot for a modest stake and waited events, with every faculty keyed and alert.

'I'll protect you,' purred Fowler. 'Let's keep the pikers out. I'll raise you about fifty — no, wait! Tham looks like he might be wanting in, so I'll make it a hundred. We don't want any bobtail flushes drawing out on us, do we?'

Bud passed; Grice hesitated, and passed, tapping the table sharply with his bunched cards.

'Oh, well, let it thlide — I path,' said Lithpin Tham, and tittered. 'But I thure would like to thee one card with thethe. Queenth and fiveth, I've got; but I can't thtand the raith.'

He laid his hand down face up; Queens and fives, with an ace. Grice faced his own hand; two kings, two jacks and a five-spot.

'Why, I can beat you!' he said.

'Here, here!' said Blake roughly. 'You've got no right to show your cards. You boys ought to know better than that.' He scowled,

and his voice was a deep growl utterly foreign to his usual suave and mellow tones; it was plain that he was still ruffled by his recent mishap at the doorway. He shook a monitory finger at the culprits. 'If you don't want to play your hand, it's your business to throw it in the discard.'

'Why, whereth the harm?' inquired Tham, unabashed.

'Well, I'll show you,' replied the exasperated house. 'Just to make it plain, suppose that you fellows had faced up four small spades apiece. Then if Yancey here had four big spades, would he be likely to draw? Exposed cards might make a heap of difference any time.'

'I thee!' said Tham, subdued.

'So do I,' remarked Pliny — and he did. An ace in his hand and one in Tham's; no one could hold four aces over his four tens; nor four kings, queens or jacks. No one could hold a straight flush with ace, king, queen or jack at the top; his four tens forbade that. And three

fives had been exposed; a straight flush, headed by any card below a ten, was impossible in hearts, spades or diamonds; the five-spots in each of these suits had been exposed and were in the discard; he had an invincible hand — almost. But a low straight club flush?

'Pass,' said Yancey.

Mr. Blanding considered his hand with evident perplexity.

'I've got better than any four big spades,' he announced. 'But I hardly know how to play them. I don't want to drive Mr. Mullins out; but then, again, I want to get even with Fowler for beating my flush. Guess I'll tilt her a lot,' he decided, and did.

Pliny meditated.

'Why, that'll take most all my chips,' he said mildly. He rubbed his chin caressingly. 'H'm! And I could raise that again, too, if I was a mind to. I might dig down in my pants pocket, and then I've got quite a wad in the safe downstairs that I left there with Jake Henry. Well, well!' He looked up smiling; his

voice was soft and pleasant. 'How much did you elevate it, Mr. Blanding?'

'Two hundred and fifty.'

'Let's see,' said Pliny. He counted up a stack, five chips at a time; he sized up the remaining chips. 'Two-fifty is right. Think I've got you beat, too, Mr. Blanding. But I'm not so sure about Fowler here. Well, well!' He rose to his feet gently, smiling down at Fowler. 'You see, I've only got four tens,' said Pliny. 'And I'm afraid you might have a straight flush — club flush, nine, eight, seven or six at the top.'

'Here, here, what's all this?' snapped Blake. 'What do you mean?'

'Keep your nose dry,' said Pliny. 'I mean to cash my checks.' He spread his hand out on the table face up. 'And I mean to get my money from your safe — right now.'

Lafe Yancey rose, Bud with him.

'More checks to cash,' said Lafe.

Fowler growled in his throat.

'Are you trying to make out we're crooked?' he spluttered, half rising.

'Sit down,' said Pliny pleasantly. His eyes were dancing. 'I wouldn't say much if I was you. There's only five of you fellows, and there's three of us. So it stands you to sing small. Got that money counted, Blake?'

He did not turn his head.

'Not yet,' mumbled the house.

The four at the table sat stupefied. Lafe smiled kindly at them.

'Play out the pot, why don't you?' he advised. 'Raise him back, Fowler. The house rules let you dig, you know.'

'Now's your chance, Fowler,' said Bud encouragingly. 'You've got scads of money. Go to it! — Snitch the deck on us, will you?'

Fowler answered never a word. The four sat in crushed silence. There was no attempt to play out the pot. They were caught with the goods, and they stood in mortal terror of these three smiling devils.

'Now we'll go downstairs. You first, Mr. Blake,' said Pliny.

'You dissolute hag!' said Bud affection-

ately, and chucked Pliny in the ribs. 'Go on, you and Yancey, and get your money. I'll stay here. Whistle when you're ready.' He beamed benevolently upon the four men at the table. 'Now you boys go on and play with the pretty cards,' he advised. 'I wouldn't go downstairs now if I was you. Mr. Mullins is feeling a leetle mite petulant, I think.'

No answer.

'It would be a good idea to practice up a little,' suggested Bud. 'You need it.'

'Oh, thut up!' said Tham. 'Think you're thmart, don't you?'

'Regular thity thlicker,' agreed Bud.

'Come on, Bud,' called Lafe from the stairway. 'Let's go up to Pliny's hotel.'

'Well, good-night, boys. Let us know who wins that pot, will you?' said Bud.

Young Tommy Garrett met them on the steps of the Carson House. He was visibly excited.

'Here's a pretty howdy-do!' he cried.

'What's the matter? Trouble at the well again?'

'No, no. Paymaster robbed above Webb this afternoon. You know where the road comes off the mesa — the short cut to Saragossa? Well, that wall of stones on the lower side of the grade — the holdup tore down a piece of that wall and then built it up again, teetering, on purpose, ready to fall, but lookin' all right on top. Dirty dog was afraid to face a man with a gun, even when he could get the drop on him. And sure enough, when old Taylor come along, the wall gave way and his little old car tipped over with him.'

'Hurt him any?'

'Some. Stunned him. When he come to, the money was gone and he was right sick. Nothing serious; but he might have died there for all the chance that cutthroat gave him. He hobbled into Webb.'

'What time was this?' asked Bud.

'I don't know exactly — didn't have time to ask. They got a bunch together and went out

there. Found a horse's track, shod all around, coming from the east, the other side of Webb, to this place where the car was wrecked. From there that track made a bee line across the flat to Salamanca. One of the crowd dropped by to get me and we overtook the posse about sundown. Got so dark we couldn't follow the tracks, so we lit out for Salamanca. Down below town, in the willows there by the railroad track, we found a saddled horse tied in the brush. Shod horse — tracks about like them we saw — and he was all gaunt and drawed and dried sweat and pretty well played out — dun horse with tiger markings, tied with the bridle reins. Come daylight, they'll follow the tracks back to where we left 'em — or the sheriff will. They wired to him and he's coming on a special. But it's a sure thing — dead open and shut. The man that got the Webb money rode that horse in here and jumped a train for Mexico. They notified the sheriff and he's wirin' his description to El Paso and Deming and Albuquerque — everywhere.'

'Why, how'd they know who the man was?'

'Oh, didn't I tell you? Why, some of this crowd knew the horse and the saddle and the man. You fellows know him, likely. Ford — Pinky Ford?'

'Never on God's green earth!' cried Lafe Yancey. He was on his feet, as if he had been lifted by the hair. 'That boy is straight as they make 'em. Some one has stolen his horse.'

'Was there any rope on the saddle?' said Pliny.

'Why, no,' said Tommy Garrett. 'Why?'

'Listen, fellows, I just came from Ford's place.' Pliny's voice was thick and hoarse. 'This is a frame-up, and worse than a frame-up. That horse was left there to be found. That's why he wasn't unsaddled and turned loose. Pinky was to bear the blame. Ten to one that boy has been killed — fifty to one! Come on, let's get to our horses and I'll be telling you. We've got to ride! Never mind your own horses; we'll get some at the livery

stable and save time. Unless we get those mountains hunted out before rain comes we'll never know what happened. And it looks black and lowery now.'

On the way to the livery stable he told the story of his visit to Lookout.

'So he went up there to meet Pelly,' concluded Pliny as they saddled in savage haste. 'And Pelly killed him there. Or maybe the sheepmen killed him. They went out with the idea of making trouble. It was Pelly, I guess. He was aimin' to jump Sweetwater Spring all along. So Pelly rode the boy's horse in to Webb and robbed the paymaster. And now he's rustled another horse and gone back, innocent, leaving the blame for that dead boy to carry — unless we find him.

'Bud, you go out to the Circle M and take Tommy with you. Find out where Pelly is and where he has been. Then take them peelers and make for the foot of Prairie Mountain. Follow up all tracks and see what has happened; work on down toward the DAY ranch.

I'll meet you somewheres, and I'll bring along Ford's saddle horses for remounts. I'll go to the DAY ranch, riding this horse halfway and leading mine. Then I'll turn him loose and ride Epidemic in. Lafe, you know the country best. Get the best men you can find — Aleck Berdine for one.'

'Eddy Early rode in last night,' said Bud.

'Get him, Lafe. And have Aleck bring his field glasses. I'll get mine from the hotel as I go by. Take the best men you can find and ride Prairie Mountain. You don't want a mob — you want a few men with heads on their shoulders. Work Prairie Mountain, follow all tracks, find Pelly, find the sheep herders, find Pinky Ford! Take any fresh horses you find and ride like hell! You're riding for the big brand now.'

CHAPTER VIII

It was late dusk when Pelly tied the dun horse in the willows below Salamanca. For nearly two hours he had lain hidden under a cut-bank in the bed of the Tórmes, half a mile farther down, where the dun horse would not call to some chance traveler on the road; long hours of fear, fuming, impatient for the dark and escape.

He took the rope from the saddle, and a filled canteen. From the back of the saddle he took the roll that Pinky Ford had tied there; he unrolled the slicker, took out the rolled blanket, rolled up the slicker and tied it behind the saddle again.

He had eaten the last of his provisions at sundown, throwing the flour sack into the narrow waters of the Tórmes. Close to the wagon road, where he would be seen by the first passer-by, he tied the dun horse by the bridle reins. He picked up rope and blanket; also a

small and heavy canvas bag. Heavy, with reason; in that small bag was all the gold from the paymaster's wrecked car. Most of the money, so far as value was concerned, had been comprised in a neat package of bills, now tucked away in the bosom of Pelly's shirt. There had been silver, too; heavy sacks of it, left behind perforce; but Pelly had not been able to leave the gold.

That was too rich a prize, though in his flight he had found it a burdensome encumbrance. Bearing these possessings, he followed a little *acequia* for some two hundred yards to a pasture lot he knew; a small field of alfalfa, where old Munroe kept three or four ancient ponies in remembrance of better days.

With small difficulty he herded these veterans into the one fence corner which was not pit dark by reason of overhanging cottonwoods. He spoke soothingly to them, and they quieted down, knowing his voice. He tossed a rope on one and led him out, but rejected him as being shod. Pelly's need was for a barefoot

horse. The next cast was more successful. The noose fell on Porfirio Diaz, and Porfirio wore no shoes. Pelly spoke to him pleasantly.

'Well, old-timer, think you can make out to carry me forty or fifty miles, hey?'

Porfirio came cheerfully, walking sedately side by side with Pelly, without tightening the lead rope. He was a wise old horse, used to the caprices of night riders, and he had known Pelly a long time. It is entirely probable that he expected a trip to Madrigal. They passed through the barbed-wire gate. Pelly knotted a halter to Porfirio's nose, he spread the folded blanket on Porfirio's patient back and wriggled up, rather handicapped in his activity by his golden burden. He left the road at once and struck across the plain, crossing the railroad farther down. He breathed freely now; the dangerous part was over. It had been hard to wait there in the old river bed, where discovery meant ruin. If some Mexican boy had wandered there, hunting rabbits at sundown! Bart Munroe might not come to his pasture

for a week. Even if he missed Porfirio tomorrow, Bart would blame it to the mischief of Salamanca urchins, who had done the like before, favoring Bart's horses because they were known to be safe and gentle.

Pelly avoided trails at first with wily caution; but this was tiresome to both the horse and rider. After a few miles he turned into a trail that headed toward a high pass between Rueda Peak and the Circle M country, straight for Prairie Mountain.

'Porfirio,' said Pelly, 'I'm glad you're fat. This riding barebacked is a new one, and it's going to be mighty tedious yet, especially with this damned sack of gold to hold on your withers.'

He was in high spirits as he rode. He reviewed the events of the last thirty hours with wondering admiration for his own cleverness. He had thought of everything; his plans worked like a clock. The shod tracks of the dun horse arrow straight from Ford's place to the scene of the holdup — these would cinch

the case against Ford if they followed the back track that far. But they wouldn't do that. Men hated to follow back tracks; they always wanted to go the other way. The horse and saddle would be known as Ford's; every one would be sure he had jumped a freight for north or south. For, why else would he tie his horse there? If he didn't take a train, then where was he? He had to be some place, didn't he? And no one had seen him. No one would have a doubt as to Pinky's guilt. As for himself, Pelly, there was no reason in the world why any one should ever suspect him.

There had been good luck with it all; Pelly acknowledged that. Taylor now; he might have been forced to shoot old Taylor, and he hadn't wanted to do that. Stubborn old fool, Taylor; he would shoot with one tenth of a chance, maybe without any chance. It had been lucky that the smash-up had knocked him out. Not hurt bad enough to die, or anything like that; just enough to get him out of the way and so he couldn't recognize anybody.

But was that luck, really? It had been a clever idea to fix the road that way to upset Taylor's car. Maybe it was more brains than luck after all! Only, he had merely planned to take Taylor at a hopeless disadvantage so there would be no shooting done. That Taylor had been knocked cold — that was luck, if you like. But the rest was brains. Call it half and half. One more little piece of riding and the trick was turned.

'I'll be glad when that's done, though. Getting pretty well fagged out. And sleepy — oh, how sleepy I am! Wish that money had all been paper. This gold is an infernal nuisance. Gosh, I'd almost give half of it to go to sleep!'

Meet some one? Not in a year! No one living between Salamanca and the Circle M ranch, and no water in the fifty miles. Nearly another fifty miles from the Circle M to Ford's place, either one of them, Lookout or Sweetwater; more than that from Lookout Tank to Salamanca. A triangle fifty miles on each side

and nobody living in it, and no water except at the corners. Nobody living outside the triangle, either — not to speak of. Outside of the three towns, you could take all the men on Purgatory Plain and in all the mountains clear around Purgatory and put 'em all in one box car. And what a carload that would be! Hard men! — Fat chance of meeting any one in a country like that! No, the danger was all over. Only, if it would just rain good and hard, and wash out all those tracks! No one to see them, of course. But the record was there, if there was only some one to see them — some one interested enough to notice.

'Good Lord, Porfirio, I almost tumbled off! I do believe I was asleep!'

The man had ridden long and far, he had lost sleep, he had been under a terrific mental strain, stunned by the shock and horror of sudden death, torn by greed and fear, fiend-ridden, keyed up to an unnatural tension by excitement and suspense as he waited for his victim, sick and shaken with terror as he fled, laden

with the evidence of his crime, through the warm bright afternoon and across a clear open plain, in a country relatively inhabited, where at any moment he might be encountered; where, nerved by desperation and fear, he had been keyed to kill without mercy to insure his own safety. There had been time for sleep when he had crouched in the river bed; but he had not slept, straining with a frenzy of impatience for the safety of night to come. But with the feeling of safety doubly sure as Salamanca was left behind, the man's overtaxed powers failed him; his bones ached, a stitch burned in his side, his legs cramped cruelly, weariness and reeling sleep made every step torture to him; he clutched at the mane as he rode, and cursed the gold he bore. Porfirio sensed the failing mastery and made his gait slow and slow; with every hour Pelly fell behind the schedule he had set for himself. The night grew overcast and chill. Pelly had no guess at the hour. The stars were hidden by a veil that was not cloud or mist so much as a

threat — a threat of rain. The time came when Pelly's weary and fevered brain could stand the strain no longer. He slipped off, spread out the blanket, and fell to troubled and broken slumbers.

That sleep was not for long — perhaps an hour. Taylor and Pinky Ford came to his side, both shot, and shot by him; they clutched him with bloody hands and he woke with a cry of terror. No more sleep for him! He rode on, and as he rode he looked up at the dark and starless sky.

'If it would only rain!'

The night wore by; and with the light, fear fell upon him.

The smell of rain was in the air. A bleak dawn found him still far out on the plain, though he had hoped to be in the high pass above Rueda Peak. He thought with fresh terror of all the tracks upon Rueda Mountain, of the chance that might bring some man there to read that story — of what they might find there.

'*Oh, God, if it would only rain!*'

Every bone was a bruise, but he doubled his rope and urged Porfirio to a smarter pace, a strong and steady fox trot. The sun broke dimly through. Pelly suffered in the body, but his brain grew something clearer. Porfirio climbed the pass, he went down the other side; then came at last to the ridges of Prairie Mountain above where Pelly had staked his horse forty-eight hours ago. Forty-eight years! And now, if any one found Porfirio with marks to show he had been used, then they would know that somebody had ridden to Prairie Mountain from Salamanca. Some one — and who? Pelly groaned. Yet if they found Porfirio shot, it would be worse still. Then they would insist upon knowing. He must take the chance.

He turned Porfirio loose on the ridge. Groaning, stumbling, he climbed down into the cañon, bearing his burden of gold. His staked horse was dreadful to see, gaunt and drawn, his flanks tucked up like a greyhound's. Long since, he had eaten all the grass within his

reach — grass dead and without substance at best: he had gone without water for two days, his eye was hollow and lusterless.

'Why, Pinhead!' said Pelly. 'I didn't know it would be so bad!'

A new alarm seized upon Pelly. He dared not let the Circle M see Pinhead in that condition. They would suspect — anything. He must have a story. . . . He had staked Pinhead; the horse had broken loose, pulled up the bush to which he was tied, had wandered off on stony ground where he left no tracks, and so had got tangled up and starved until he was found, stumbled upon by chance. That would account for this gnawed circle in the grass if it was found. But he would have to go to Lookout — he had no choice. He couldn't go back to the ranch until Pinhead looked different and until Pelly felt different. After a night's sleep and something to eat, he would see everything in a different light and tell a convincing story. But what would he do with the money? Bury it — hide it in the rocks —

for some one to find? If some one came here, seeing these tracks, followed, found where he had hidden it?

His fevered and exhausted brain came always back to the one thought. Some one would come, the sheepmen would come, his own cowboys would come; they would see all those tracks, they would grow curious, they would follow the sign, they would find the money if he hid it. They might even find — the body.... He would go straight to Lookout, he would claim he had been there all the time, looking for Pinhead, who had broken loose with the rope on . . . *If it would only rain!*

No doubt the sheepmen were upon the hill right now. Why take this wretched blanket of Ford's? He dared not leave it, for it might be found; he dared not burn it, the fire would be seen or the ashes would be found, smelling of wool, and set men wondering. He must ride abroad, bearing the evidence of his guilt on his saddle — the blanket and the gold. He might hide the gold, taking the currency with him.

Couldn't bury the currency. Nothing to put it in to protect it from the wet, from gnawing vermin. But the gold?

'Damned if I do!' said Pelly. 'I wish to God I had never touched it! But I've earned it, every cent. I'll take it to Lookout and hide it there. Then if it ever should be found, it will be Ford's doing. I won't touch it for a year — for two years.'

He rode forth, slow and stumbling. The clouds were black and low on the hills and wisps of fog hung in the cedar brakes. In the first range of hills between Prairie Mountain and Lookout, he turned aside to a little tank, miscalled the Indian well. On a slope of bare limestone, some harder rock had lodged on a projection; there, spinning with the infrequent floods of a thousand centuries, it had worn a smooth round hole in the solid limestone, had ground it deeper and ever smaller, grinding itself smaller in the process, leaving a pot-hole, polished and smooth, nearly two feet wide at the surface and tapering gently to six inches at

the bottom. Within the memory of living man this boring stone, bright and hard and round, had fitted on the floor of the well to tell the story; some unknown and vandal hand had carried it away. The place was known and guarded; the cowboys covered it with a flat slab of limestone so that water might run under to fill it, but cattle could not drink it, so saving it for the needs of men. Pelly lifted the slab and let the luckless Pinhead drink, with bending knees; he staked Pinhead in the nearest grass and flung himself down to the black sleep of exhaustion.

He woke in the late afternoon. The fogs were low on the hillsides, the day was dark and gloomy, a thin shivering mist drifted through the iron passes of the hill, veiling the valleys to vague and unfamiliar outlines. There was no wind, and no sound. Pelly rode wearily on into the silence and the coming night.

Day faded as he reached Lookout. He unsaddled at the door of the little house. He carried the saddle through the door. He went out

to the stone forge beneath the juniper, where Pinky shod his horses, and brought a pick and shovel which leaned there; he took them into the house and closed the door. He spread old newspapers on the floor; slowly, carefully, he shoveled the ashes from the hearth and piled them on the papers. Then he bent with pick and shovel, digging with frantic haste to make a deep hole where the fire had been, piling the earth upon the hearthstone. Twilight fell chill and gray as he worked. From a cupboard on the wall he brought two five-pound baking-powder cans with tight covers.

In one of these tins he placed a package which he took from his shirt, and into the other one he crowded a small canvas sack which he brought from his saddle. He twisted the covers tightly on the tins and laid them in the hole he had dug; he covered them deep with the earth piled on the hearthstone, sweeping up every grain; he tamped the earth down. Then he covered the earth with the heaped ashes, working swiftly in the darkening room.

He crumpled up the newspapers and threw them in the fireplace, he knelt and touched a match to them, he piled cedar splinters upon them. As the flame blazed up, he added slim sticks of split cedar, standing them on end. The cedar crackled merrily, the warm firelight lit the room. Pelly drew a chair close and leaned forward, spreading his hands to the cheerful blaze. His haggard face relaxed and he drew a long sigh of relief. He was safe at last.

After a little time he leaned back in the chair, lifting his feet to warm them at the fire; his eye wandered about the room and came at last to the corner where the coats hung. A stern eye met his, a hard implacable face looked forth from between two coats. Pliny Mullins stepped out into the room. Pelly collapsed to a huddled heap.

Pliny came to the fireplace and leaned upon it; he looked down at the chair.

'You have a gun, Pelly,' he said. 'Look, I have both hands on the mantel.'

A haggard face looked up at him, shriveled in hopeless misery, voiceless, imploring. Pliny bent down and took Pelly's gun.

'I saw you coming,' he said. 'Coming from Prairie Mountain, weren't you? Where did you kill Pinky Ford? You'll take me to him in the morning, but you'll tell me now.'

The woeful huddle stirred; a voice came from it, croaking, horrible.

'Not that! Not murder! His horse fell with him. The tracks will show if it don't rain. . . . On Prairie Mountain. He was dead before I got to him. I was behind, riding slower. . . . The tracks will tell you.'

Pliny threw open the door.

'There will be no tracks on Prairie Mountain,' he said. 'It is raining, and it's raining harder every minute — and you hang for murder!'

PASÓ POR AQUÍ

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CHAPTER I

EXCEPTIONS are so inevitable that no rule is without them — except the one just stated. Neglecting fractions then, not to insult intelligence by specifying the obvious, trained nurses are efficient, skillful, devoted. It is a noble calling. Nevertheless, it is notorious that the official uniform is of reprehensible charm. This regulation is variously explained by men, women, and doctors. 'No fripperies, curlicues, and didos — bully!' say the men. 'Ah! Yes! But why? Artful minxes!' say the women, who should know best. 'Cheerful influence in the sick room,' say the doctors.

Be that as it may, such uniform Jay wore, spotless and starched, crisp and cool; Jay Hollister, now seated on the wide portico of the Alamogordo Hospital; not chief nurse, but chief ornament, according to many, not

only of that hospital, but also of the great railroad which maintained it. Alamogordo was a railroad town, a new town, a ready-made and highly painted town, direct from Toyland.

Ben Griggs was also a study in white — flannels, oxfords, and panama; a privileged visitor who rather overstepped his privileges; almost a fixture in that pleasant colonnade.

'Lamp of life,' said Ben, 'let's get down to brass tacks. You're homesick!'

'Homesick!' said Jay scornfully. '*Homesick!* I'm heartsick, bankrupt, shipwrecked, lost, forlorn — here in this terrible country, among these dreadful people. Homesick? Why, Ben, I'm just damned!'

'Never mind, heart's delight — you've got me.'

Miss Hollister seemed in no way soothed by this reassuring statement.

'Your precious New Mexico! Sand!' she said. 'Sand, snakes, scorpions; wind, dust, glare, and heat; lonely, desolate, and forlorn!'

'Under the circumstances,' said Ben, 'you

could hardly pay me a greater compliment, "Whither thou goest, I will go," and all that. Good girl! This unsolicited tribute ——'

'Don't be a poor simpleton,' advised the good girl. 'I shall stick it out for my year, of course, since I was foolish enough to undertake it. That is all. Don't you make any mistakes. These people shall never be my people.'

'No better people on earth. In all the essentials ——'

'Oh, who cares anything about essentials?' cried Jay impatiently — voicing, perhaps, more than she knew. 'A tin plate will do well enough to eat out of, certainly, if that is what you mean. I prefer china, myself. I'm going back where I can see flowers and the green grass, old gardens and sundials.'

'I know not what others may say,' observed Ben grandly, 'but as for me, you take the sundials and give me the sun. Right here, too, where they climb for water and dig for wood. Peevish, my fellow townsman; peevish, waspy,

crabbed. You haven't half enough to do. In this beastly climate people simply will not stay sick. They take up their bed and beat it, and you can't help yourself. Nursing is a mere sinecure.' His hands were clasped behind his head, his slim length reclined in a steamer chair, feet crossed, eyes half closed, luxurious. "Ah, idleness!' he murmured. 'Too bad, too bad! You never were a grouch back home. Rather good company, if anything.'

Ben's eyes were blue and dreamy. They opened a trifle wider now, and rolled slowly till they fell upon Miss Hollister, bolt upright and haughty in her chair, her lips pressed to a straight line. She regarded him sternly. He blinked, his hands came from behind his head, he straightened up and adjusted his finger-tips to meet with delicate precision. 'But the main trouble, the fount and origin of your disappointing conduct is, as hereinbefore said, homesickness. It is, as has been observed, a nobler pang than indigestion, though the symptoms are of striking similarity. Nostalgia, more

than any other feeling, is fatal to the judicial faculties, and I think,' said Ben, 'I think, my dear towny, that when you look at this fair land, your future home, you regard all things with a jaundiced eye.'

'Oh-h!' gasped Jay, hotly indignant. 'Look at it yourself! Look at it!'

The hospital was guarded and overhung by an outer colonnade of cottonwoods; she looked through a green archway across the leagues of shimmering desert, somber, wavering, and dim; she saw the long bleak range beyond, saw-toothed and gray; saw in the midway levels the unbearable brilliance of the White Sands, a dazzle and tumult of wild light, a blinding mirror with two score miles for diameter.

But Ben's eyes widened with delight, their blue darkened to a deeper blue of exultation, not to be feigned.

'More than beautiful — fascinating,' he said.

'Repulsive, hateful, malignant, appalling!' cried Jay Hollister bitterly. 'The starved,

withered grass, the parched earth, the stunted bushes — miserable, hideous — the abomination of desolation!'

'Girl, by all good rights I ought to shut your wild, wild mouth with kisses four — that's what I orter do — elocutin' that way. But you mean it, I guess.' Ben nodded his head sagely. 'I get your idea. Blotched and leprous, eh? Thin, starved soil, poisoned and mildewed patches — thorns and dwarfed scrub, red leer of the sun. Oh, *si!* Like that bird in Browning? Hills like giants at a huntin' lay — the round squat turret — all the lost adventurers, my peers — the Dark Tower, weird noises just offstage, increasin' like a bill, I mean a bell — increasin' like a bell, fiddles a-moanin', "O-o-o-h-h-h! What did you do-o-o with your summer's wa-a-a-ges? So this is Paris!" Yes, yes! But why not shed the second-hand stuff and come down to workaday?'

'Ben Griggs,' said Miss Hollister with quiet and deadly conviction, 'you are absolutely the most blasphemous wretch that ever walked in

shoe leather. You haven't anything even remotely corresponding to a soul.'

'When we are married,' said Ben, and paused, reflecting. 'That is, if I don't change my mind ——'

'Married!' said Miss Hollister derisively. '*When! You!*' Her eyes scorned him.

'Woman,' said Ben, 'beware! You make utter confusion with the parts of speech. You make mere interjections of pronouns, prepositions, and verbs and everything. You use too many shockers. More than that — mark me, my lass — isn't it curious that no one has ever thought to furnish printed words with every phonograph record of a song? Just a little sheet of paper — why, it needn't cost more than a penny apiece at the outside. Then we could know what it was all about.'

'The way you hop from conversational crag to crag,' said Jay, 'is beyond all praise.'

'Oh, well, if you insist, we can go back to our marriage again.'

'My poor misguided young friend,' said Jay,

'make no mistakes. I put up with you because we played together when we were kids, and because we are strangers here in a strange land, townies together ——'

Ben interrupted her. 'Two tawny townies twisting twill together!' he chanted happily, beating slow time with a gentle finger. 'Twin turtles twitter tender twilight twaddle. Twice twenty travelers ——'

'Preposterous imbecile!' said Jay, dimpling nevertheless, adorably. 'Here is something to put in your little book. Jay Hollister will never marry an idler and a wastrel. Why, you're not even a ne'er-do-well. You're a do-nothing, net.'

'All the world loves a loafer,' Ben protested. 'Still, as Alice remarked, if circumstances were different they would be quite otherwise. If frugal industry ——'

'There comes your gambler friend,' said Jay coldly.

'Who, Monte? Where?' Ben turned eagerly.

'Across the street. No, the other way.'

Though she fervently disapproved of Monte, Jay was not sorry for the diversion. It was daily more difficult to keep Ben in his proper place, and she had no desire to discuss frugal industry.

'Picturesque rascal, what? Looking real pleased about something, too. Say, girl, you've made me forget something I was going to tell you.'

'He is laughing to himself,' said Jay.

'I believe he is, at that.' Ben raised his voice. 'Hi, Monte! Come over and tell us the joke.'

CHAPTER II

MONTE'S mother had known him as Rosalio Marquez. The overname was professional. He dealt monte wisely but not too well. He was nearing thirty-five, the easiest age of all; he was slender and graceful; he wore blue serge and a soft black hat, low-crowned and wide-brimmed. He carried his hat in his hand as he came up the steps. He bowed courteously to Jay, with murmured greetings in Spanish, soft syllables of lingering caress; he waved a friendly salute to Ben.

'Yes, indeed,' said Ben. 'With all my heart. Your statement as to the beauty of the day is correct in every particular, and it affords me great pleasure to endorse an opinion so just. But, after all, dear heart, that is hardly the point, is it? The giddy jest, the merry chuckles — those are the points on which we greatly desire information.'

Monte hesitated, almost imperceptibly, a shrewd questioning in his eyes.

'Yes, have a chair,' said Jay, 'and tell us the joke.'

'Thees is good, here, thank you,' said Monte. He sat on the top step and hung the black hat on his knee; his face lit up with soft low laughter. 'The joke? O, eet ees upon the sheriff, Jeem Hunter. I weel tell it.'

He paused to consider. In his own tongue Monte's speech sounded uncommonly like a pack of firecrackers lit at both ends. In English it was leisured, low, and thoughtful. The unslurred vowels, stressed and piquant, the crisp consonants, the tongue-tip accents — these things combined to make the slow caressing words into something rich and colorful and strange, all unlike our own smudged and neutral speech. The customary medium of the Southwest between the two races is a weird and lawless hodge-podge of the two tongues — a barbarous *lingua franca.*

As Miss Hollister had no Spanish, Monte

drew only from his slender stock of English; and all unconsciously he acted the story as he told it.

'When Jeem was a leetle, small boy,' said Monte, his hand knee-high to show the size in question, 'he dream manee times that he find thoss marbles — oh, many marbles! That mek heem ver' glad, thees nize dream. Then he get older' — Monte's hand rose with the sheriff's maturity — 'and some time he dream of find money lak thoss marble. And now Jeem ees grown and sheriff — an' las' night he come home ver' late, ver' esleepy. I weel tell you now how eet ees, but Jeem he did not know eet. You see, Melquiades he have a leetle, litla game.' He glanced obliquely at Miss Hollister, his shoulders and down-drawn lips expressed apology for the little game, and tolerance for it. 'Just neeckles and dimes. An' some fellow he go home weener, and there ees hole een hees pocket. But Jeem he do not know. *Bueno*, Jeem has been to Tularosa, Mescalero, Fresnal, all places, to leef word to look out for thees fellow

las' week what rob the bank at Belen, and he arrive back on a freight train las' night, mebbe so about three in the morning — oh, veree tired, ver' esleepy. So when he go up the street een the moonlight he see there a long streeng of neeckles and dimes under hees feet.' Without moving, Monte showed the homeward progress of that drowsy man and his faint surprise. 'So Jeem he laugh and say, "There ees that dream again." And he go on. But bimeby he steel see thoss neeckles, and he peench heemself, so — and he feel eet.' Monte's eyes grew round with astonishment. 'And he bend heemself to peek eet, and eet ees true money, and not dreaming at all! Yais. He go not back, but on ahead he peek up one dollar seexty-five cents of thees neeckles and dimes.'

'I hadn't heard of any robbery, Monte,' said Ben. 'What about it?'

'Yes, and where is Belen?' said Jay. 'Not around here, surely. I've never heard of the place.'

'Oh, no, *muy lejos* — a long ways. Belen, what you call Bethlehem, ees yonder thees side of Albuquerque, a leetle. I have been there manee times, but not estraight — round about.' He made a looping motion of his hand to illustrate. 'Las Vegas, and then down, or by Las Cruces, and then up. Eet is hundred feefty, two hundred miles in estraight line — I do not know.'

'Anybody hurt?' asked Ben.

'Oh, no — no fuss! Eet ees veree funnee. Don Numa Frenger and Don Nestor Trujillo, they have there beeg estore to sell all theengs, leetle bank, farms, esheep ranch, freighting for thoss mines, buy wool and hides — all theengs for get the monee what ees there een thees place. And las' week, maybe Friday, Saturday, Nestor he ees go to deennair, and Numa Frenger ees in the estore, *solito*.

'Comes een a customer, *un colorado* — esscusa me, a red-head. He buy tomatoes, cheese, crackers, sardines, sooch things, and a nose bag, and he ask to see shotgun. Don

Numa, he exheebit two, three, and thees red he peek out nize shotgun. So he ask for shells, bird-eshot, buck-eshot, and he open the buck-eshot and sleep two shells een barrel, and break eet to throw out thoss shell weeth extractor, and sleep them een again. "Eet work fine!" he say. "Have you canteen?"

'Then Numa Frenger he tek long pole weeth hook to get thoss canteen where eet hang from the *viga*, the r-rafter, the beams. And when he get eet, he turn around an' thees estranger ees present thees shotgun at hees meedle. Yais.

'"Have you money een your esafe?" say the *estranjero*, the estr-ranger. And Numa ees bite hees mouth. "Of your kindness," say the customer, "weel you get heem? I weel go weeth you?"

'So they get thees money from the esafe. And thees one weel not tek onlee the paper money. "Thees gold an' seelver ees so heav-ee," he tell Numa Frenger. "I weel not bozzer." Then he pay for those theengs of which he mek purchase an' correc' Don Numa

when he mek meestake in the *adición*, and get hees change back. And then he say to Numa, "Weel you not be so good to come to eshow me wheech ees best road out from thees town to the ford of the reever?" And Numa, he ees ge-nash hees teeth, but there ees no *remedio*.

'And so they go walking along thees lane between the orchards, these two togezzer, and the leetle bir-rds esing een the *árboles* — thees red fellow laughing and talkin' weeth Numa, ver' gay — leading hees horse by the bridle, and weeth the shotgun een the crook of hees arm. So the people loog out from the doors of their house and say, "Ah! Don Numa ees diverrt heemself weeth hees friend."

'And when they have come beyond the town, thees fellow ees mount hees horse. "For your courtesy," he say, "I thank you. At your feet," he say. "Weeth God!" And he ride off laughing, and een a leetle way he toss hees shotgun een a bush, and he ride on to cross the reever, eslow. But when Numa Frenger see thees, he run queeckly, although he ees a ver'

fat man, an' not young; he grab thees gun, he point heem, he pull the triggle —— Nozzing! He break open the gun to look wizzen side —— Nozzing! *O caballeros y conciudadanos!*' Monte threw down the gun; both hands grabbed his black locks and tugged with the ferocity of despair.

'Ah-h! What a lovely cuss-word,' cried Jay. 'How trippingly it goes upon the tongue. I must learn that. Say it again!'

'But eet ees not a bad word, that,' said Monte sheepishly. 'Eet ees onlee idle word, to feel up. When thees *politicos* go up an' down, talking nonsense een the nose, when they weesh to theenk of more, then they say with *emoción*, "*O caballeros y conciudadanos*"; that ees, "gentlemen and fellow ceetizens." No more.'

'Well, now, the story?' said Ben. 'He crossed the river, going east — was that it?'

'Oh, yes. Well, when Numa Frenger see that thees gun ees emptee, he ees ver' angree man. He ees more enr-rage heemself for that

than for all what gone befor-re. He ees arrouse all Belen, he ees send telegraph to Sabinal, La Joya, Socorro, San Marcial, ever wheech way, to meek queek the posse, to send queek to the mesa to catch thees man, to mek *proclamación* to pay for heem three thousand dollar of rewar-rd. "Do not keel heem, I entr-reat you," say Don Numa. "Breeng heem back. I want to fry heem."'

'Now isn't that New Mexico for you?' demanded Jay. 'A man commits a barefaced robbery, and you make a joke of it.'

Monte placed the middle finger of his right hand firmly in the palm of his left, pressed firmly as if to hold something there, and looked up under his brows at Miss Hollister.

'Then why do you laugh?' said Monte.

'You win,' said Jay. 'Go on with the story.'

'Well, then,' said Monte, 'thees fellow he go up on the high plain on thees side of the reever, and he ride east and south by Sierra Montoso, and over the mountains of Los Piños, and he mek to go over Chupadero Mesa

to thoss ruins of Gran Quivira. But he ride onlee *poco á poco*, easalee. And already a posse from La Joya, San Acacia is ride up the Alamillo Cañon, and across the plain.' His swift hands fashioned horseman, mountain, mesa, and plain. 'Page Otero and six, five other men. And they ride veree fast so that already they pass in front of him to the south. They are now before heem on Chupadero, and there they see heem. Eet ees almost sundown.

'*Inmediatamente* he turn and go back. And their horses are not so tired lak hees horse, and they spread out and ride fast, and soon they are about to come weetheen gunshot weeth the rifle. And when he see eet, thees *colorado* ees ride oopon a reedge that all may see, and he tek that paper money from the nose bag at the head of the saddle and he toss eet up — pouf! The weend is blow gentle and thees money it go joomp, joomp, here, there, een the booshes. Again he ride a leetle way, and again he scatter thees money lak a man to feed the hen een hees yard. So then he go on away, thees red one.

And when thees posse come to that place, thees nize money is go hop, hop, along the ground and over the booshes. There ees feefty-dollar beel een the mesquite, there ees twenty-dollar beel een the tar-bush, there ees beels blow by, roll by, slide by. So thees posse ees deesmount heemself to peek heem, *muy enérgico* — lively. And the weend ees come up faster at sundown, *como siempre* "Come on!" says Page Otero. "Come on, thees fellow weel to escape!" Then the posse loog up surprise, and say, "Who, me?" and they go on to peek up thees monee. So that redhead get clear away thees time.'

'Did they get all the money?' asked Ben.

'Numa he say yes. He do not know just how mooch thees bandit ees take, but he theenk they breeng back all, or most nearly all.'

'Do they know who he was?' asked Jay.

'*Por cierto*, no. But from the deescreepcion and hees horse and saddle, they theenk eet ees a cowboy from Quemado, name — I cannot to pr-ronounce thees name, Meester Ben. You

say heem. I have eet here een "La Voz del Pueblo."' From a hip pocket he produced a folded newspaper printed in Spanish, and showed Ben the place.

'Ross McEwen — about twenty-five or older, red hair, gray eyes, five feet nine inches — humph!' he returned the paper. 'Will they catch him, do you think?'

Monte considered. He looked slowly at the far dim hills; he bent over to watch an inch-high horseman at his feet, toiling through painful immensities.

'The world ees ver' beeg een thees country,' he said at last. 'I theenk most mebbe not. *Quién sabe?* Onlee thees fellow must have water — and there ees not much water. Numa Frenger ees send now to all places, to Leencoln County; to Jeem Hunter here, and he meks every one to loog out; to Pat Garrett in Doña Ana Countee, and Pat watches by Parker Lake and the pass of San Agustin; to El Paso, and they watch there most of all that he pass not to Mexico Viejo. Eet may be

at some water place they get heem. Or that he get them. He seem lak a man of some enterpr-rize, no?' He rose to go. 'But I have talk too much. I mus' go now to my beesness.'

'A poor business for a man as bright as you are,' said Jay, and sniffed.

'But I geeve a square deal,' said Monte serenely. 'Eet ees a good beesness. At your feet, señorita! Unteel then, Meester Ben.'

'Isn't he a duck? I declare, it's a shame to laugh at his English,' said Jay.

'Don't worry. He gets to hear our Spanish, even if he is too polite to laugh.'

'I hate to think of that man being chased for blood money,' said Jay. 'Hunter and that Pat Garrett you think so much of are keen after that reward, it seems. It is dreadful the way these people here make heroes out of their killers and man-hunters.'

'Let's get this straight,' said Ben. 'You're down on the criminal for robbing and down on the sheriff for catching him. Does that sound like sense? If there was no reward offered, it's

the sheriff's duty to catch him, isn't it? And if there is a reward, it's still his duty. The reward doesn't make him a man-hunter. Woman, you ain't right in your head. And as for Pat Garrett and some of these other old-timers — they're enjoying temporary immortality right now. They've become a tradition while they still live. Do you notice how all these honest-to-goodness old-timers talk? All the world is divided into three parts. One part is old-timers and the other two are not. The most clannish people on earth. And that brings us, by graceful and easy stages, to the main consideration, which I want to have settled before I go. And when I say settled, I mean that nothing is ever settled till it is settled right — get me?' He stood up; as Jay rose he took both her hands. 'If circumstances were otherwise, Jay?'

She avoided his eyes. 'Don't ask me now. I don't know, Ben — honest, I don't. You mustn't pester me now. It isn't fair when I'm so miserable.' She pulled her hands away.

'Gawd help all poor sailors on a night like this!' said Ben fervently. 'Listen, sister, I'm going to work, see? Goin' to fill your plans and specifications, every damn one, or bust a tug.'

'I see you at it,' jeered Jay, with an unpleasant laugh. 'Work? You?'

'Me. I, myself. A faint heart never filled a spade flush,' said Ben. 'Going to get me a job and keep it. Lick any man that tries to fire me. Put that in your hope chest. Bye-bye, little didums. At your feet!'

As he went down the street his voice floated back to her:

'But now my hair is falling out,
And down the hill we'll go,
And sleep together at the foot —
John Barleycorn, my Jo!'

CHAPTER III

A HIGH broad tableland lies east of the Rio Grande, and mountains make a long unbroken wall to it, with cliffs that front the west. This mesa is known locally as El Corredor. It is a pleasing and wholesome country. Zacatón and salt grass are gray green upon the level plain, checkered with patches of bare ground, white and glaring. On those bare patches, when the last rains fell, weeks, months, or years ago, an oozy paste filmed over the glossy levels, glazed by later suns, cracking at last to shards like pottery. But in broken country, on ridges and slopes, was a thin turf of buffalo and mesquite grass, curly, yellow, and low. There was iron beneath this place and the sand of it was red, the soil was ruddy white, the ridges and the lower hill slopes were granite red, yellowed over with grass. Even the high crowning cliffs were faintly cream, not gray, as limestone is elsewhere. Sunlight was soft and mellow there,

sunset was red upon these cliffs. And Ross McEwen fled down that golden corridor.

If he had ridden straight south, he might have been far ahead by this time, well on the road to Mexico. But his plan had been to reach the Panhandle of Texas; he had tried for easting and failed. Three times he had sought to work through the mountain barrier to the salt plains — a bitter country of lava flow and sinks, of alkali springs, salt springs, magnesia springs, soda springs; of soda lakes, salt lakes, salt marshes, salt creeks; of rotten and crumbling ground, of greasy sand, of chalk that powdered and rose on the lightest airs, to leave no trace that a fugitive had passed this way.

He had been driven back once by the posse on Chupadero. Again at night he had been forced back by men who did not see him. He had tried to steal through by the old Ozanne stage road over the Oscuro, and found the pass guarded; and the last time, to-day, had been turned back by men that he did not even see. In the mouth of Mockingbird Pass he had

found fresh-shod tracks of many horses going east. Mockingbird was held against him.

He could see distinctly, and in one eye-flight, every feature of a country larger than all England. He could look north to beyond Albuquerque, past the long ranges of Manzano, Montoso, Sandia, Oscuro; southward, between his horse's ears, the northern end of the San Andrés was high and startling before him, blue black with cedar brake and piñon, except for the granite-gold top of Salinas Peak. Westward was the great valley of the Jornado del Muerto, the Journey of the Dead, its width the fifty miles which lay between the San Andrés and the Rio Grande.

And beyond the river was a bright enormous expanse, bounded only by the crust of the dozen ranges that made the crest of the Continental Divide — Dátil, Magdalena, San Mateo, the Black Range, the Mimbres, Florida.

Between, bordering the midway river, other mountain ranges lay tangled: Cuchillo Negro,

Fra Cristobál, Sierra de los Caballos, Doña Ana, Robelero. It was over the summits of these ranges that he saw the Continental Divide.

Here was irony indeed. With that stupendous panorama outspread before him, he was being headed off, driven, herded! He cocked an eyebrow aslant at the thought, and spoke of it to his horse, who pricked back an ear in attention. He was a honey-colored horse, and his name was Miél; which is, by interpretation, Honey.

'Wouldn't you almost think, sweetness,' said Ross McEwen in a plaintive drawl, 'that there was enough elbow-room here to satisfy every reasonable man? And yet these lads are crowdin' me like a cop after an alley cat.'

He sensed that an unusual effort was being made to take him, and he smiled — a little ruefully — at the reflection that the people at Mockingbird might well have been mere chance comers upon their lawful occasions, and with no designs upon him, no knowledge of

him. Every man was a possible enemy. He was out of law.

This was the third day of his flight. The man was still brisk and bold, the honey-colored horse was still sturdy, but both lacked something of the sprightly resilience they had brought to the fords of Belen. There had been brief grazing and scant sleep, night riding, doubling and twisting to slip into lonely water holes. McEwen had chosen, as the lesser risk, to ride openly to Prairie Springs. He had found no one there and had borrowed grub for himself and several feeds of corn for the Honey horse. There had been no fast riding, except for the one brief spurt with the posse on Chupadero. But it had been a steady grind, doubly tiresome that they might not keep to the beaten trails. Cross-country traveling on soft ground is rough on horseflesh.

And now they left the plain and turned through tar-bush up the long slope to the San Andrés. A thousand ridges and hollows came plunging and headlong against them; and with

that onset, at once and suddenly the tough little horse was tiring, failing.

Halfway to the hill foot they paused for a brief rest. High on their slim lances, banners of yucca blossoms were white and waxen, and wild bees hummed to their homes in the flower stalks of last year; flaunting afar, cactus flowers flamed crimson or scarlet through the black tar-bush.

Long since McEwen had given up the Panhandle. He planned now to bear far to the southeast, crossing the salt plains below the White Sands to the Guadalupe Mountains, where they straddled the boundary between the territory and Texas, and so east to the Staked Plains. He knew the country ahead, or had known it ten years before. But there would be changes. There was a new railroad, so he had heard, from El Paso to Tularosa, and so working north toward the States. There would be other things, too — new ranches, and all that. For sample, behind him, just where this long slope merged with the flats, three un-

expected windmills, each five miles from the other, had made a line across his path; he had made a weary détour to pass unseen.

The San Andrés made here a twenty-mile offset where they joined the Oscuro, with the huge round mass of Salinas Peak as their mutual corner. Lava Gap, the meeting-place of the two ranges, was now directly at his left and ten miles away. The bleak and mile-high walls of it made a frame for the tremendous picture of Sierra Blanca, sixty long miles to the east, with a gulf of nothingness between. Below that nothingness, as McEwen knew, lay the black lava river of the Mal Pais. But Lava Gap was not for him. Unless pursuit was quite abandoned, Lava Gap and Dripping Springs would be watched and guarded. He was fenced in by probabilities.

But the fugitive was confident yet, and by no means at the end of his resources. He knew a dim old Indian trail over a high and improbable pass beyond Salinas Peak. It started at Grapevine Spring, Captain Jack Crawford's ranch.

'And at Grapevine,' said Ross aloud, 'I'll have to buy, beg, borrow, or get me a horse. Hope there's nobody at home. If there's any one there I'll have to get his gun first and trade afterwards. Borrowing horses is not highly recommended, but it beats killing 'em.'

To the right and before him the Jornado was hazy, vast, and mysterious. To the right and behind him, the lava flow of San Pascual sprawled black and sinister in the lowlands; and behind him —— Far behind him, far below him, a low line of dust was just leaving the central windmill of those three new ranches, a dozen miles away. McEwen watched this dust with some interest while he rolled and lit a cigarette. He drank the last water from his canteen.

'Come on, me bold outlaw,' he said, 'keep moving. You've done made your bed, but these hellhounds won't let you sleep in it.' He put foot to stirrup; he stroked the Honey horse.

'Miél, old man, you tough it out four or five

miles more, and your troubles will be over. Me for a fresh horse at Grapevine, come hell or high water. Take it easy. No hurry. Just shuffle along.'

The pursuing dust did not come fast, but it came straight his way. 'I'll bet a cooky,' said Ross sagely, 'that some of these gay bucks have got a spyglass. Wonder if that ain't against the rules? And new men throwin' in with them at every ranch. Reckon I would, too, if it wasn't for this red topknot of mine. Why couldn't they meet up with some other red-headed hellion and take him back? Wouldn't that be just spiffin'? One good thing, anyway — I didn't go back to the Quemado country. Some of the boys would sure have got in Dutch, hidin' me out. This is better.'

He crossed the old military road that had once gone through Lava Gap to Fort Stanton; he smiled at the shod tracks there; he came to the first hills, pleasingly decorated with bunches of mares — American mares, gentle mares — Corporal Tanner's mares. He picked

a bunch with four or five saddle horses in it and drove them slowly up Grapevine Cañon. The Miél horse held up his head and freshened visibly. He knew what this meant. The sun dropped behind the hills. It was cool and fresh in Grapevine.

The outlaw took his time. He had a long hour or more. He turned for a last look at the north and the cliffs of Oscuro Mountain blazing in the low sun to fiery streamers of red light. You would have seen, perhaps, only a howling wilderness; but this man was to look back, waking and in dream, and to remember that brooding and sunlit silence as the glowing heart of the world. From this place alone he was to be an exile.

'Nice a piece of country as ever laid outdoors,' said Ross McEwen. 'I've seen some several places where it would be right pleasant to have a job along with a bunch of decent punchers — good grub and all that, mouth organ by the firelight after supper —— Or herding sheep.'

Grapevine Spring is at the very head of the cañon. To east, south, and west the hills rise directly from the corral fences. McEwen drove the mares into the water pen and called loudly to the house. The hail went unanswered. Eagles screamed back from a cliff above him.

'A fool for luck,' said McEwen.

He closed the bars, he gave Miél his first installment of water. Then he went to the house. It was unlocked and there was no one there. The ashes on the hearth were cold. He borrowed two cans of beans and some bacon; he borrowed and ground a little coffee. There was a slender store of corn, and he borrowed one feed of this to make to-morrow's breakfast for the new horse he was soon to acquire. He found an old saddle and he borrowed that, with an old bridle as well; he brought his own to replace them; he lit the little lamp on the table and grinned happily.

'They'll find Miél and my saddle and the light,' he said, 'and they'll make sure I've taken to the brush.'

He went back to the pen, he roped and saddled a saddle-marked brown, broad-chested and short-coupled, unshod. Shod tracks are too easily followed. Then he scratched his red head and grinned again. The pen was built of poles laid in panels, except at the front; the cedar brake grew to the very sides of it. He went to the back and took down two panels, laying the poles aside; he let the mares drift out there, seeing to it that some of them went around by the house, and the rest on the other side of the pen. It was almost dark by now.

'There,' he said triumphantly. 'The boys will drive in a bunch of stock when they come, for remounts, and they'll go right on through. Fine mess in the dark. And it'll puzzle them to find which way I went, with all these here tracks. Time I was gone.'

He came back to the watering-trough; he washed his hands and face and filled his canteen; he went on where Miél stood weary and huddled in the dusk. His hand was gentle on that drooping neck.

'Miél, old fellow,' he said, 'you've been one good little horse to me. *Bueno suerte.*' He led the brown to the bars. 'I hate a fool,' said Ross McEwen.

He took down the bars and rode into the cedar brush at right angles to the cañon, climbing steadily from the first. It was a high and desperate pass, and branches had grown across the unused trail; long before he had won halfway to the summit he heard, far below him, the crashing of horses in the brush, the sound of curses and laughter. The pursuit had arrived at Grapevine.

He topped the summit of that nameless pass an hour later, and turned down the dark cañon to the east — to meet grief at once. Since his time a cloudburst had been this way. Where once had been fair footing the flood had cut deep and wide, and every semblance of soil had washed away, leaving only a wild moraine, a loose rubble of rocks and tumbled boulders. But it was the only way. The hillsides were

impossibly steep and sidelong, glassy granite and gneiss, or treacherous slides of porphyry. Ross led his horse. Every step was a hazard in that narrow and darkened place, with crumbling ridge and pit and jump off, with windrows of smooth round rock to roll and turn under their feet. It took the better part of two hours to win through the narrows, perhaps two miles. The cañon widened then, the hillsides were lower and Ross could ride again, picking his doubtful way in the starlight. He turned on a stepladder of hills to the north, and came about midnight to Dripstone, high in a secret hollow of the hills. The prodigious bulk of Salinas loomed mysterious and incredible above him in the starlight.

He tied the brown horse securely and named him Porch Climber. He built a tiny fire and toasted strips of bacon on the coals; he opened and ate one can of his borrowed beans. Then he spread out his saddle blankets with hat and saddle for pillow, and so lay down to untroubled sleep.

CHAPTER IV

He awoke in that quiet place before the first stirring of dawn. A low thin moon was in the sky and the mountains were dim across the east. He washed his eyes out with water from the canteen. He made a nose bag from the corn sack and hung it on Porch Climber's brown head. The Belen nose bag had gone into the discard days before. He washed out the empty bean can for coffee-pot. He built a fire of twigs and hovered over it while his precious coffee came to a boil; his coat was thin and the night air was fresh, almost chilly. He smacked his lips over the coffee; he saddled and watered Porch Climber at Dripstone and refilled his canteen there. Porch Climber drank sparingly.

'Better fill up, old-timer,' Ross advised him. 'You're sure going to need it.'

Knuckled ridges led away from Salinas like fingers of a hand. The eastern flat was some

large fraction of a mile nearer to sea level than the high plain west of the mountain, and these ridges were massive and steep accordingly. He made his way down one of them. The plain was dark and cold below him; the mountains took shape and grew, the front range of the Rockies — Capitan, Carrizo, Sierra Blanca, Sacramento, with Guadalupe low and dim in the south; the White Sands were dull and lifeless in the midway plain. Bird twitter was in the air. Rabbits scurried through the brush, a quail whirred by and sent back a startled call; crimson streaks shot up the sky, and day grew broad across the silent levels. The cutbanks of Salt Creek appeared, wandering away southeast toward the marshes. Low and far against the black base of the Sacramento, white feathers lifted and fluffed, the smoke of the first fires at Tularosa, fifty miles away. Flame tipped the far-off crests, the sun leaped up from behind the mountain wall, the level light struck on the White Sands, glanced from those burnished bevels and splashed on the western

cliffs; the desert day blazed over this new half-world.

He had passed a few cows on the ridges, but now, as he came close to the flats, he was suddenly aware of many cattle before him, midges upon the vast plain; more cattle than he had found on the western side of the mountains. He drew rein, instantly on the alert, and began to quarter the scene with a keen scrutiny. At once a silver twinkling showed to northward — the steel fans of a windmill, perhaps six miles out from the foot of the main mountain. His eye moved slowly across the plain. He was shocked to find a second windmill tower some six or eight miles south of the first, keeping at the same distance from the hills, and when he made out the faint glimmer of a third, far in the south, he gave way to indignation. It was a bald plain with no cover for the quietly disposed, except a few clumps of soapweed here and there. And this line of windmills was precisely the line of the road to El Paso. Where he had expected smooth going he would have to

keep to the roughs; to venture into the open was to court discovery. He turned south across the ridges.

He had talked freely to Miél, but until now he had been reticent with Porch Climber, who had not yet won his confidence. At this unexpected reverse he opened his heart.

'Another good land gone wrong,' he said. 'I might have known it. This side of Salt Creek is only half-bad cow country, so of course it's all settled up, right where we want to go. Of course no one would live east of Salt Creek, not even sheep herders. And we couldn't possibly make it, goin' on the other side of Salt Creek with all that marsh country and the hell of the White Sands. Why, this is plumb ridiculous!'

He meditated for a while upon his wrongs and then broke out afresh: 'When I was here, the only water east of the mountains was the Wildy Well at the corner of the damn White Sands. Folks drove along the road, and when they wanted water they nicely went up in the

hills. It's no use to cross over to Tularosa. They'll be waiting for us there. No, sir, we've pointedly got to skulk down through the brush. And you'll find it heavy going, up one ridge and down another, like a flea on a washboard.'

Topping the next ridge, he reined back swiftly into a hollow place. He dismounted and peered through a mesquite bush, putting the branches aside to look. A mile to the south two horsemen paced soberly down a ridge — and it was a ridge which came directly from the pass to Grapevine.

'Now ain't them the bright lads?' said the runaway, divided between chagrin and admiration. 'What are you going to do with fellows like that? I ask you. I left plain word that I done took to the hills afoot, without the shadow of a doubt. Therefore, they reasoned, I hadn't. They've coppered every bet. Now that's what I call clear thinkin'. I reckon some of 'em did stay there, but these two crossed over that hell-gate at night, just in case.

'I'll tell a man they had a ride where that cloudburst was. Say, they'll tell their grandchildren about that — if they live that long, which I misdoubt, the way they're carryin' on. This gives me what is technically known as the willies. Hawse,' said McEwen, 'let's us tarry a spell and see what these hirelin' bandogs are goin' to do now.'

He took off the bridle and saddle, he staked Porch Climber to rest and graze while he watched. What the bandogs did was to ride straight to the central windmill, where smoke showed from the house. McEwen awaited developments. Purely from a sense of duty he ate the other can of beans while he waited.

'They'll take word to every ranch,' he prophesied gloomily. 'Leave a man to watch where there isn't any one there — take more men along when they find more than one at a well. Wish to God I was a drummer.'

His prognostications were verified. After a long wait, which meant breakfast, a midget horseman rode slowly north toward the first

windmill. A little later two men rode slowly south toward the third ranch.

'That's right, spread the news, dammit, and make everybody hate you,' said Ross. He saddled and followed them, paralleling their course, but keeping to the cover of the brush.

It was heavy and toilsome going, boulders and rocks alternating with soft ground where Porch Climber's feet went through; gravel, coarse sand, or piled rocks in the washes; tedious twisting in the brush and wearisome windings where a bay of open country forced a détour. He passed by the mouths of Good Fortune, Antelope, and Cottonwood cañons, struggling through their dry deltas; he drew abreast of the northern corner of the White Sands. The reflection of it was blinding, yet he found it hard to hold his eyes away. The sun rode high and hot. McEwen consulted his canteen.

More than once or twice came the unwelcome thought that he might take to the hill country, discard Porch Climber and hide by

some inaccessible seep or pothole until pursuit died down. But he was a stubborn man, and his heart was set upon Guadalupe; he had an inborn distaste for a diet of chance rabbit and tuna fruit — or, perhaps, slow deer without salt. A stronger factor in his decision — although he hardly realized it — was the horseman's hatred for being set afoot. He could hole up safely; there was little doubt of that. But when he came out of the hole, how then? A man from nowhere, on foot, with no past and no name and a long red beard — that would excite remark. He fingered the stubble on his cheeks with that reflection. Yes, such a man would be put to it to account for himself — and he would have to show up sometime, somewhere. The green cottonwood of Independent Spring showed high on the hill to his right. He held on to the south.

And now he came to the mouth of Sulphur Springs Cañon. Beyond here a great bay of open plain flowed into the hill foot under Kaylor Mountain; and midmost of that bay was

another windmill, a long low house, spacious corrals. McEwen was sick of windmills. But this one was close under the mountain, far west of the line of the other ranches and of the El Paso road; McEwen saw with lively interest that his pursuers left the road and angled across the open to this ranch. That meant dinner.

'Honesty,' said McEwen with conviction, 'is the best policy. Dinner-time for some people, but only noon for me. . . . And how can these enterprisin' chaps be pursuin' me when they're in front? That isn't reasonable. Who every heard of deputies goin' ahead and the bandit taggin' along behind? That's not right. It's not moral. I'm goin' around. Besides, if I don't this thing is liable to go on always, just windmills and windmills — to Mexico City — Peru — Chile. I'm plumb tired of windmills. Porch Climber,' said McEwen, 'have you got any gift of speed? Because, just as soon as these two sheriff men get to that ranch and have time to go in the house, you and me

are going to drift out quiet and unostentatious across the open country till we hit the banks of the Salt Marsh. And if these fellows look out and see us you've just got to run for it. They can maybe get fresh horses too. But if they don't see us we'll be right. We'll drift south under cover of the bank and get ahead of 'em while they stuff their paunches.'

Half an hour later he turned Porch Climber's head to the east, and rode sedately across the smooth plain, desiring to raise no dust. Some three miles away, near where he crossed the El Paso road, grew a vigorous motte of mesquite trees. Once beyond that motte, he kept it lined up between him and the ranch; and so came unseen to where the plain broke away to the great marsh which rimmed the basin of the White Sands.

In the east the White Sands billowed in great dry dunes above the level of the plain, but the western half was far below that level, and waterbound. This was the home of mirages; they spread now all their pomp of

palm and crystal lake and fairy hill. McEwen turned south along the margin. Here, just under the bank, the ground was moist, almost wet, and yet firm footing, like a road of hard rubber. He brought Porch Climber to a long-reaching trot, steady and smooth; he leaned forward in his stirrups and an old song came to his lips, unsummoned. He sang it with loving mockery, in a nasal but not unpleasing barytone:

'They gave him his orders at Monroe, Virginia,
Sayin', "Pete, you're way behind ti-ime" ——

'Gosh, it does seem natural to sing when a good horse is putting the miles behind him,' said McEwen. 'This little old brown pony is holdin' up right well, too, after all that grief in the roughs this mawnin'.

'He looked 'raound then to his black, greasy fireman,
"Just shovel in a little more co-o-al,
And when we cross that wide old maounting,
You can watch old Ninety-Seven roll!"

'Hey, Porch Climber! You ain't hardly keepin' time. Peart up a little! Now, lemme

see. Must be about twenty mile to the old Wildy Well. Wonder if I'll find any more new ranches between here and there? Likely. Hell of a country, all cluttered up like this!

'It's a mighty rough road from Lynchburg to Danville,
And a line on a three-mile gra-ade,
It was on that grade that he lo-ost his av'rage,
And you see what a jump he made!'

He rejoined the wagon road where the White Sands thrust a long and narrow arm far to the west. The old road crossed this arm at the shoulder, a three-mile speedway. Out on the sands magic islands came and went and rose and sunk in a misty sea. But in the south, where the road climbed again to the plain, was the inevitable windmill — reality and no mirage.

McEwen followed the road in the posture of a man who had nothing to fear. He had outridden the rumor of his flight; he could come to this ranch with a good face. But he reined down to a comfortable jog. Those behind might overtake him close enough to spy him in this naked place. Jaunting easily, nearing

the ranch where he belonged, a horseman was no object of suspicion; but a man in haste was a different matter.

There was no one at the ranch. The water was brackish and flat, but the two wayfarers drank thankfully. He could see no signs that any horses were watering there; he made a shrewd guess that the boys had taken the horses and gone up into the mountains for better grass and sweet water, or perhaps to get out of sight of the White Sands, leaving the flats to the cattle.

'Probably they just ride down every so often to oil the windmill,' he said. 'Leastways, I would. Four hundred square miles of lookin'-glass, three hundred and sixty-four days a year — no, thank you! My eyes are 'most out now.'

JB was branded on the gateposts of the corral; JB was branded on the door. He found canned stuff on a shelf and a few baking-powder biscuits, old and dry. He took a can of salmon and filed it for future reference.

'No time for gormandizin' now,' he said. He stuffed the stale biscuits into his pocket to eat on the road. 'There's this much about bread,' said McEwen; 'I can take it or I can leave it alone. And I've been leaving it alone for some several days now.'

A pencil and a tablet lay on the table. His gray eyes went suddenly adance with impish light. He tore out a page and wrote a few words of counsel and advice:

Hey, you JB waddies: Look out for a fellow with red hair and gray eyes. Medium-sized man. He robbed the bank at Belen, and they think he came this way. Big reward offered for him. Two thousand, I hear. But I don't know for certain. Send word to the ranches up north. I will tell them as far south as Organ.

JIM HUNTLEY

He hung this news-letter on a nail above the stove.

'There!' he said. 'If them gay jaspers that are after me had any sense a-tall, they'd see it was no use to go any further, and they'd stay right here and rest up. But they won't. They'll

say, "Hey, this is the way he went — here's some more of the same old guff! But how ever did that feller get down here without us findin' any tracks? You can see what a jump he made." I don't want to be ugly,' said McEwen, 'but I've got to cipher up some way to shake loose from these fellows. I want to go to sleep.... Now who in hell is Jim Huntley?'

Time for concealment was past. From now on he must set his hope on speed. He rode down the big road boldly and, for a time, at a brisk pace; he munched the dry biscuits and washed them down with warm and salty water from his canteen.

There was hardly room for another ranch between here and Wildy's Well. Wildy's was an old established ranch. It was among the possibilities that he might hit here upon some old acquaintance whose failing sight would not note his passing, and who would give him a fresh horse. He was now needing urge of voice and spur for Porch Climber's lagging feet. It sat in his mind that Wildy was dead.

His brows knitted with the effort to remember. Yes, Wildy had been killed by a falling horse. Most likely, though, he would find no one living at the well. Not too bad, the water of Wildy's Well — but they would be in the hills with the good grass.

The brown horse was streaked with salt and sweat; he dragged in the slow sand. Here was a narrow, broken country of rushing slopes, pinched between the White Sands and the mountains. The road wound up and down in the crowding brush; the footing was a coarse pebbly sand of broken granite from the crumbling hills. Heat waves rose quivering, the White Sands lifted and shuddered to a blinding shimmer, the dream islands were wavering, shifting, and indistinct, astir with rumor. McEwen's eyes were dull for sleep, red-rimmed and swollen from glare and alkali dust. The salt water was bitter in his belly. The stubble on his face was gray with powdered dust and furrowed with sweat stains; dust was in his nostrils and his ears, and the taste of dust was in

his mouth. Porch Climber ploughed heavily. And all at once McEwen felt a sudden distaste for his affair.

He had a searching mind and it was not long before he found a cause. That damn song! Dance music. There were places where people danced, where they would dance to-night. There was a garden in Rutherford ——

CHAPTER V

THERE was no one at Wildy's Well, no horses there and no sign that any horses were using there. McEwen drank deep of the cool sweet water. When Porch Climber had his fill, McEwen plunged arms and head into the trough. Horse and man sighed together; their eyes met in comfortable understanding.

'Feller,' said McEwen, 'it was that salt water, much as anything else, that slowed yuh up, I reckon. Yuh was sure sluggish. And yuh just ought to see yourself now! Nemmine, that's over.' He took down his rope and cut off a length, the spread of his arms. He untwisted this length to three strands, soaked these strands in the trough, wrung them out and knotted them around his waist. He eyed the cattle that had been watering here. They had retreated to the far side at his coming and were now waiting impatiently. 'Been many a long year since I've seen any Durham cattle,'

said McEwen. 'Everybody's got white-face stuff now. Reckon they raise these for El Paso market. No feeder will buy 'em, unless with a heavy cut in the price.'

He hobbled over and closed the corral gate. Every bone of him was a separate ache. A faint breeze stirred; the mill sails turned lazily; the gears squeaked a protest. Ross looked up with interest.

'That was right good water,' he said. 'Guess you've earned a greasing.' He climbed the tall tower. Wildy's Well dated from before the steel windmill; this was massive and cumbersome, a wooden tower, and the wheel itself was of wood. After his oiling Ross scanned the north with an anxious eye. There was no dust. South by east, far in the central plain, dim hills swam indeterminate through the heat haze — Las Cornudas and Heuco. South by west, gold and rose, the peaks of the Organs peered from behind the last corner of the San Andrés. He searched the north again. He could see no dust — but he could almost

see a dust. He shook his head. 'Them guys are real intelligent,' he said. 'I'm losin' my av'rage.' He clambered down with some celerity, and set about what he had to do.

He tied the severed end of his rope to the saddle horn, tightened the cinches, swung into the saddle and shook out a loop. Hugging the fence, the cattle tore madly around the corral in a wild cloud of dust. McEwen rode with them on an inner circle, his eye on a big roan steer, his rope whirling in slow and measured rhythms. For a moment the roan steer darted to the lead; the loop shot out, curled over, and tightened on both forefeet; Porch Climber whirled smartly to the left; the steer fell heavily. Ross swung off; as he ran, he tugged at the hogging string around his waist. Porch Climber dragged valiantly, Ross ran down the rope, pounced on the struggling steer, gathered three feet together and tied them with the hogging string. These events were practically simultaneous.

McEwen unsaddled the horse. 'I guess you

can call it a day,' he said. He opened the gate and let the frightened cattle run out. 'Here,' he said, 'is where I make a spoon or spoil a horn.' He cut a thong from a saddle string and tied his old plough-handle forty-five so that it should not jolt from the scabbard. He made a tight roll of the folded bridle, that lonely can of salmon, and his coat, with his saddle blanket wrapped around all; he tied these worldly goods securely behind the cantle. He uncoupled the cinches and let out the quarter straps to the last hole.

The tied steer threshed his head madly, bellowing wild threats of vengeance. McEwen carried the saddle and placed it at the steer's back, where he lay. He found a short and narrow strip of board, like a batten, under the tower; and with this, as the frantic roan steer heaved and threshed in vain efforts to rise, he poked the front cinch under the struggling body, inches at a time, until at last he could reach over and hook his fingers into the cinch ring. Before he could do this he was forced to tie the

free foot to the three that were first tied; it had been kicking with so much fury and determination that the task could not be accomplished. Into the cinch ring he tied the free end of his rope, bringing it up between body and tied feet; he took a double of loose rope around his hips, dug his heels into the sand and pulled manfully every time the steer floundered; and so, at last and painfully, drew the cinch under until the saddle was on the steer's back and approximately where it should be. Then he put in the latigo strap, taking two turns, and tugged at the latigo till the saddle was pulled to its rightful place. At every tug the roan steer let out an agonized bawl. Then he passed the hind cinch behind the steer's hips and under the tail, drawing it up tightly so that the saddle could not slip over the steer's withers during the subsequent proceedings.

McEwen stood up and mopped the muddy sweat from his face; he rubbed his aching back. He filled his canteen at the trough, drank again, and washed himself. He rolled a smoke; he

lashed the canteen firmly to the saddle forks. Porch Climber was rolling in the sand. McEwen took him by the forelock and led him through the open gate.

'If you should ask me,' he said, 'this corral is a spot where there is going to be trouble, and no place at all for you.' He looked up the north road. Nothing in sight.

He went back to the steer. He hitched up his faded blue overalls, tightened his belt, and squinted at the sun; he loosened the last-tied foot and coiled the rope at the saddle horn. Then he eased gingerly into the saddle. The steer made lamentable outcry, twisting his neck in a creditable attempt to hook his tormentor; the free foot lashed out madly. But McEwen flattened himself and crouched safely, with a full inch of margin; the steer was near to hooking his own leg and kicking his own face, and he subsided with a groan. McEwen settled himself in the saddle.

'Are ye ready?' said McEwen.

'Oi am!' said McEwen.

'Thin go!' said McEwen, and pulled the hogging string.

The steer lurched sideways to his feet, paused for one second of amazement, and left the ground. He pitched, he plunged, he kicked at the stirrups, he hooked at the rider's legs, he leaped, he ran, bawling his terror and fury to the sky; weaving, lunging, twisting, he crashed sidelong into the fence, fell, scrambled up in an instant. The shimmy was not yet invented. But the roan steer shimmied, and he did it nobly; man and saddle rocked and reeled. Then, for the first time, he saw the open gate and thundered through it, abandoning all thought except flight.

Shaken and battered, McEwen was master. The man was a rider. To use the words of a later day, he was 'a little warm, but not at all astonished.' Yet he had not come off scot-free. When they crashed into the fence he had pulled up his leg, but had taken an ugly bruise on the hip. The whole performance, and more particularly the shimmy feature, had been a poor

poultice for aching bones. Worse than all, the canteen had been crushed between fence and saddle. The priceless water was lost.

His hand still clutched the hogging string; he had no wish to leave that behind for curious minds to ponder upon. Until his mount slowed from a run to a pounding trot, he made no effort to guide him, the more because the steer's chosen course was not far from the direction in which McEwen wished to go. Wildy's Well lay at the extreme southwestern corner of the White Sands, and McEwen's thought was to turn eastward. He meant to try for Luna's Wells, the old stage station in the middle of the desert, on the road which ran obliquely from Organ to Tularosa. When time was ripe McEwen leaned over and slapped his hat into the steer's face, on the right side, to turn him to the left and to the east.

The first attempt at guidance, and the fourth attempt, brought on new bucking spells. McEwen gave him time between lessons; what he most feared was that the roan would 'sull,'

or balk, refusing to go farther. When the steer stopped, McEwen waited until he went on of his own accord; when his progress led approximately toward McEwen's goal, he was allowed to go his own way unmolested. McEwen was bethorned, dragged through mesquite bushes, raked under branches; his shirt was ribboned and torn. But he had his way at last. With danger, with infinite patience, and with good judgment, he forced his refractory mount to the left and ever to the left, and so came at last into a deep trail which led due east. Muttering and grumbling, the steer followed the trail.

All this had taken time, but speed had also been a factor. When McEwen felt free to turn his head, only a half-circle of the windmill fans showed above the brush. Wildy's Well was miles behind them.

'Boys,' said McEwen, 'if you follow me this time, I'll say you're good!'

The steer scuffed and shambled, taking his own gait; he stopped often to rest, his tongue hung out, foam dripped from his mouth. Mc-

Ewen did not urge him. The way led now through rotten ground and alkali, now through chalk that powdered and billowed in dust; deep trails, channeled by winds at war. As old trails grew too deep for comfort, the stock had made new ones to parallel the old; a hundred paths lay side by side.

McEwen was a hard case. A smother of dust was about him, thirst tormented him, his lips were cracked and bleeding, his eyes sunken, his face fallen in; and weariness folded him like a garment.

'Slate water is the best water,' said McEwen.

They came from chalk and brush into a better country; poor, indeed, and starved, but the air of it was breathable. The sun was low and the long shadows of the hills reached out into the plain. And now he saw, dead in front, the gleaming vane and sails of a windmill. Only the top — the fans seemed to touch the ground — and yet it was clear to see. McEwen plucked up heart. This was not Luna's.

Luna's was far beyond. This was a new one. If it stood in a hollow place —— And it did! —— It could not be far away. Water!

For the first time McEwen urged his mount, gently, and only with the loose and raveled tie string. Once was enough. The roan steer stopped, pawed the ground, and proclaimed flat rebellion. For ten minutes, perhaps, McEwen sought to overrule him. It was of no use. The roan steer was done. He took down his rope. With a little loop he snared a pawing and rebellious forefoot. He pulled up rope and foot with all his failing strength, and took a quick turn on the saddle horn. The roan made one hop and fell flat-long. McEwen tied three feet, though there was scant need for it. He took off the saddle, carried it to the nearest thicket and raised it, with pain, into the forks of a high soapweed, tucking up latigos and cinches. With pain; McEwen, also, was nearly done.

'My horse gave out on me. I toted my saddle a ways, but it was too heavy, and I hung

it up so the cows couldn't eat it,' he said, in the tone of one who recites a lesson.

He untied the steer then and came back hot-foot to his soapweed, thinking that the roan might be in fighting humor. But the roan was done. He got unsteadily to his feet, with hanging head and slavering jaws; he waited for a little and moved slowly away.

'Glad he didn't get on the prod,' said McEwen. 'I sure expected it. That was one tired steer. He sure done me a good turn. Guess I'll be strollin' into camp.'

It was a sorry strolling. A hundred yards — a quarter — a half — a mile. The windmill grew taller; the first night breeze was stirring; he could see the fans whirl in the sun. A hundred yards — a quarter — a mile! An hour was gone. The shadows overtook him, passed him; the hills behind were suddenly very close and near, notched black against a crimson sky. Thirst tortured him, the windmill beckoned, sunset winds urged him on. He came to the brow of the shallow dip in which the ranch lay;

he saw a little corral, a water pen, a long dark house beyond; he climbed into the water pen and plunged his face into the trough.

The windmill groaned and whined with a dismal clank and grinding of dry gears. Yet there was a low smoke over the chimney. How was this? The door stood open. Except for the creaking plaint of the windmill, a dead quiet hung about the place, a hint of something ominous and sinister. Stumbling, bruised, and outworn, McEwen came to that low dark door. He heard a choking cough, a child's wailing cry. His foot was on the threshold.

'What's wrong? *Que es?*' he called.

A cracked and feeble voice made an answer that he could not hear. Then a man appeared at the inner door; an old man, a Mexican, clutching at the wall for support.

'*El garrotillo*,' said the cracked voice. 'The strangler — diphtheria.'

'I'm here to help you,' said McEwen.

CHAPTER VI

Of what took place that night McEwen had never afterward any clear remembrance, except of the first hour or two. The drone of bees was in his ears, and a whir of wings. He moved in a thin, unreal mist, giddy and light-headed, undone by thirst, weariness, loss of sleep — most of all by alkaline and poisonous dust, deep in his lungs. In the weary time that followed, though he daily fell more and more behind on sleep and rest, he was never so near to utter collapse as on this first interminable night. It remained for him a blurred and distorted vision of the dreadful offices of the sick-room; of sickening odors; of stumbling from bed to bed as one sufferer or another shook with paroxysms of choking.

Of a voice, now far off and now clear, insistent with counsel and question, direction and appeal; of lamplight that waned and flared and dwindled again; of creak and clang and pound-

ing of iron on iron in horrible rhythm, endless, slow, intolerable. That would be the windmill. Yes, but where? And what windmill?

Of terror, and weeping, and a young child that screamed. That woman — why, they had always told him grown people didn't take diphtheria. But she had it, all right. Had it as bad as the two youngsters, too. She was the mother, it seemed. Yes, Florencio had told him that. Too bad for the children to die. . . . But who the devil was Florencio? The windmill turned dismally — clank and rattle and groan.

That was the least one choking now — Felix. Swab out his throat again. Hold the light. Careful. That's it. Burn it up. More cloth, old man. Hold the light this way. There, there, *pobrecito!* All right now. . . . Something was lurking in the corners, in the shadows. Must go see. Drive it away. What's that? What say? Make coffee? Sure. Coffee. Good idea. Salty coffee. Windmill pumpin' salt water. Batter and pound and squeal. Round

and round. Round and round. Round and round.... Tell you what. Goin' to grease that damn windmill. Right now.... Huh? What's that? Wait till morning? All right. All ri'. Sure.

His feet were leaden. His arms minded well enough, but his hands were simply wonderful. Surprisin' skillful, those hands. How steady they were to clean membranes from little throats. Clever hands! They could bring water to these people, too, lift them up and hold the cup and not spill a drop. They could sponge off hot little bodies when the children cried out in delirium. Wring out rag, too! Wonderful hands! Mus' call people's 'tention to these hands sometime. There, there, let me wash you some more with the nice cool water. Now, now — nothing will hurt you. Uncle Happy's goin' to be right here, takin' care of you. Now, now — go to sleep — go-o to sleep!

But his feet were so big, so heavy and so clumsy, and his legs were insubordinate. 'Specially the calves. The calf of each leg,

where there had once been good muscles of braided steel, was now filled with sluggish water of inferior quality. That wasn't the worst, either. There was a distinct blank place, a vacuum, something like the bead in a spirit level, and it shifted here and there as the water sloshed about. Wonder nobody had ever noticed that.

Must be edgin' on toward morning. Sick people are worst between two and four, they say. And they're all easier now, every one. Both kids asleep — tossin' about! And now the mother was droppin' off. Yes, sir — she's goin' to sleep. What did the old man call her? Estefanía. Yes — Est'fa' ——

He woke with sunlight in his eyes. His arm sprawled before him on a pine table and his head lay on his arm. He raised up, blinking, and looked around. This was the kitchen, a sorry spectacle. The sick-room lay beyond an open door. He sat by that door, where he could see into the sick-room. They were all asleep. The woman stirred uneasily and threw

out an arm. The old man lay huddled on a couch beyond the table.

McEwen stared. The fever had passed and his head was reasonably clear. He frowned, piecing together remembered scraps from the night before. The old man was Florencio Telles, the woman was the wife of his dead son, these were his grandchildren. Felix was one. Forget the other name. They had come back from a trip to El Paso a week ago, or some such matter, and must have brought the contagion with them. First one came down with the strangler, then another. Well poisoned with it, likely. Have to boil the drinking-water. This was called Rancho Perdido — the Lost Ranch. Well named. The old fellow spoke good English. McEwen was at home in Spanish, and, from what he remembered of last night, the talk had been carried on in either tongue indifferently. What a night!

He rose and tiptoed out with infinite precaution. The wind was dead. He went to the well and found the oil; he climbed up and

drenched the bearings and gears. He was surprised to see how weak he was and how sore; and for the first time in his life he knew the feeling of giddiness and was forced to keep one hand clutched tightly to some support as he moved around the platform — he, Ross McEwen.

When he came back the old man met him with finger on lip. They sat on the warm ground, where they could keep watch upon the sick-room, obliquely, through two doors; just far enough away for quiet speech to be unheard.

'Let them sleep. Every minute is so much of coined gold. We won't make a move to wake them. And how is it with you, my son?'

'Fine and fancy. When I came here last night I had a thousand aches, and now I've got only one.'

'And that one is all over?'

'That's the place. Never mind me. I'll be all right. How long has this been going on?'

'This is the fifth day for the oldest boy, I

think. He came down with it first, Demetrio. We thought it was only a sore throat at first. Maybe six days. I am a little mixed up.'

'Should think you would be. Now listen. I know something about diphtheria. Not much, but this for certain. Here's what you've got to do, old man: Quick as they wake up in there, you go to bed and stay in bed. You totter around much more and you're going to die. There's your fortune told, and no charge for it.'

'Oh, I'm not bad. I do not cough hard. The strangler never hurts old people much.' So he said, but every word was an effort.

'Hell, no, you're not bad. Just a walkin' corpse, tha's all. You get to bed and save your strength. When any two of 'em are chokin' to death at once, that'll be time enough for you to hobble out and take one of them off my hands. Do they sleep this long, often?'

'Oh, no. This is the first time. They are always better when morning comes, but they have not all slept at the same time, never before. My daughter, you might say, has not

slept at all. It has been grief and anxiety with her as much as the sickness. They will all feel encouraged now, since you've come. If it please God, we'll pull them all through.'

'Look here!' said McEwen. 'It can't be far to Luna's Well. Can't I catch up a horse and lope over there after while — bring help and send for a doctor?'

'There's no one there. Francisco Luna and Casimiro both have driven their stock to the Guadalupe Mountains, weeks ago. It has been too dry. And no one uses the old road now. All travel goes by the new way, beyond the new railroad.'

'I found no one at the western ranches yesterday,' said McEwen.

'No. Every one is in the hills. The drought is too bad. There is no one but you. The nearest help is Alamogordo — thirty-five miles. And if you go there some will surely die before you get back. I have no more strength. I will be flat on my back this day.'

'That's where you belong. I'll be nurse

and cook for this family. Got anything to cook?'

'Not much. *Frijoles*, jerky, bacon, flour, a little canned stuff, and dried peaches.'

McEwen frowned. 'It is in my mind they ought to have eggs and milk.'

'When the cattle come to water, you can shut up a cow and a calf — or two of them — and we can have a little milk to-night. I'll show you which ones. As I told you last night, I turned out the cow I was keeping up, for fear I'd get down and she would die here in the pen.'

'Don Florencio, I'm afraid I didn't get all you told me last night,' said McEwen thoughtfully. 'I was wild as a hawk, I reckon. Thought that windmill would certainly drive me crazy. Fever.'

The old man nodded. 'I knew, my son. It galled my heart to make demands on you, but there was no remedy. It had to be done. I was at the end of my strength. Little Felix, if not the other, would surely have been dead by

now, except for the mercy of God which sent you here.'

McEwen seemed much struck by this last remark. He cocked his head a little to one side painfully, for his neck was stiff; he pursed his lip and held it between finger and thumb for a moment of meditation.

'So that was it!' he said. 'I see! Always heard tell that God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform. I'll tell a man He does!'

A scanty breakfast, not without gratitude; a pitiful attempt at redding up the hopeless confusion and disorder. The sick woman's eyes followed McEwen as he worked. A good strangling spell all around, including the old man, then a period of respite. McEwen buckled on his gun and brought a hammer and a lard pail to Florencio's bed.

'If you need me, hammer on this, and I'll come a-running. I'm going out to the corral and shoot some beef tea. You tell me about what milk cows to shut up.'

Don Florencio described several milk cows. 'Any of them. Not all are in to water any one day. Stock generally come in every other day, because they get better grass at a distance. And my brand is TT — for my son Timoteo, who is dead. You will find the cattle in poor shape, but if you wait awhile you may get a smooth one.'

McEwen nodded. 'I was thinking that,' he said. 'I want some flour sacks. I'll hang some of the best up under the platform on the windmill tower, where the flies won't bother it.'

They heard a shot later. A long time afterward he came in with a good chunk of meat, and set about preparing beef tea. 'I shut up a cow to milk,' he said. 'A lot of saddle horses came in and I shut them up. Not any too much water in the tank. After while the cattle will begin bawling and milling around, if the water's low. That will distress our family. Can't have that. So I'll just harness one on to the sweep of the horse power, slip on a blindfold, and let him pump. You tell me which ones will work.'

The old man described several horses.

'That's O.K.,' said McEwen. 'I've got two of them in the pen. Your woodpile is played out. Had to chop down some of your back pen for firewood.'

He departed to start the horse power. Later, when beef tea had been served all around, he came over and sat by Florencio's bed.

'You have no drop or grain of medicine of any kind,' he said, 'and our milk won't be very good when we get it, from the looks of the cows — not for sick people. So, everything being just as it is, I didn't look for brands. I beefed the best one I could find, and hung the hide on the fence. Beef tea, right this very now, may make all the difference with our family. Me, I don't believe there's a man in New Mexico mean enough to make a fuss about it under the circumstances. But if there's any kick, there's the hide and I stand back of it. So that'll be all right. The brand was DW.'

'It is my very good friend, Dave Woods, at

San Nicolas. That will be all right. Don David is *muy simpático*. Sleep now, my son, sleep a little while you may. It will not be long. You have a hard night before you.'

'I'm going up on the rising ground and set a couple of soapweeds afire,' said McEwen at dark. 'They'll make a big blaze and somebody might take notice. I'll hurry right back. Then I'll light some more about ten o'clock and do it again to-morrow night. Some one will be sure to see it. Just once, they might not think anything. But if they see a light in the same place three or four times, they might look down their nose and scratch their old hard head — a smart man might. Don't you think so?'

'Why, yes,' said Florencio, 'it's worth trying.'

'Those boys are not a bit better than they was. And your daughter is worse. We don't want to miss a bet. Yes, and I'll hold a blanket before the fire and take it away and put it back, over and over. That ought to

help people guess that it is a signal. Only — they may guess that it was meant for some one else.'

'Try it,' said Florencio. 'It may work. But I am not sure that our sick people are not holding their own. They are no better, certainly, even with your beef-tea medicine. But we can't expect to see a gain, if there is a gain, for days yet. And so far, they seem worse every night and then better every morning. The sunlight cheers them up at first, and then the day gets hot and they seem worse again. Try your signals, by all means. We need all the help there is. But if you could only guess how much less alone I feel now than before you came, good friend!'

'It must have been plain hell!' said the good friend.

'Isn't there any other one thing we can do?' demanded McEwen the next day, cudgeling his brains. It had been a terrible night. The little lives fluttered up and down; Estefanía

was certainly worse; Florencio, though he had but few strangling spells, was very weak — the aftermath of his earlier labors.

'Not one thing. My poor ghost, no man could have done more. There is no more to do.'

'But there is!' McEwen fairly sprang up, wearied as he was. 'We have every handicap in the world, and only one advantage. And we don't use that one advantage. The sun has a feud with all the damn germs there is; your house is built for shade in this hot country. I'm going to tote all of you out in the sun with your bedding, and keep you there a spell. And while you're there I'll tear out a hole in the south end of your little old adobe wall and let more sunlight in. After the dust settles enough, I'll bring you back. Then we'll shovel on a little more coal, and study up something else. And to-night we'll light up our signal fires again. Surely some one will be just fool enough to come out and see what the hell it's all about.'

Hours later, after this programme had been carried out, McEwen roused from a ten minute sleep and rubbed his fists in his eyes.

'Are you awake, Don Florencio?' he called softly.

'Yes, my son. What is it?'

'It runs in my mind,' said McEwen, 'that they burn sulphur in diphtheria cases. Now, if I was to take the powder out of my cartridges and wet it down, let it get partly dry and make a smudge with it — a little at a time —— There's sulphur in gunpowder. We'll try that little thing.' He was already at work with horseshoe pinchers, twisting out the bullet. He looked up eagerly. 'Haven't any tar, have you? To stop holes in your water troughs.'

'*Hijo*, you shame me. There is a can of piñon pitch, that I use for my troughs, under the second trough at the upper end. I never once thought of that.'

'We're getting better every day,' said McEwen joyfully. 'We'll make a smoke with some of that piñon wax, and we'll steep some

of it in boiling water and breathe the steam of it; we'll burn my wet powder, and when that's done, we'll think of something else; and we'll make old bones yet, every damn one of us! By gollies, to-morrow between times I'm goin' to take your little old rifle and shoot some quail.'

'Between times? Oh, Happy!'

'Oh, well, you know what I mean — just shovel on a little more coal — better brag than whine. Hi, Estefanía — hear that? We've dug up some medicine. Yes, we have. Ask Don Florencio if we haven't. I'm going after it.'

As he limped past the window on his way to the corral he heard the sound of a sob. He paused midstep, thinking it was little Felix. But it was Estefanía.

'*Madre de Dios, ayudale su enviado!*'

He tiptoed away, shamefaced.

CHAPTER VII

SLEEPING on a very thin bed behind a very large boulder, two men camped at the pass of San Agustin; a tall young man and a taller man who was not so young. The very tall man was Pat Garrett, sheriff of Doña Ana, sometime sheriff of other counties. The younger man was Clint Llewellyn, his deputy, and their camp was official in character. They were keeping an eye out for that Belen bandit, after prolonged search elsewhere.

'Not but what he's got away long ago,' said Pat, in his quiet, drawling speech, 'but just in case he might possibly double back this way.'

It was near ten at night when Pat saw the light on the desert. He pointed it out to Clint. 'See that fire out there? Your eyes are younger than mine. Isn't it sinking down and then flaring up again?'

'Looks like it is,' said Clint. 'I saw a fire there — or two of 'em, rather — just about

dark, while you took the horses down to water.'

'Did you?' said Pat. He stroked his mustache with a large slow hand. 'Looks to me like some one was trying to attract attention.'

'It does, at that,' said Clint. 'Don't suppose somebody's had a horse fall with him and got smashed, do you?'

'Do you know,' said Pat slowly, 'that idea makes me ache, sort of? One thing pretty clear. Somebody wants some one to do something for somebody. Reckon that's us. Looks like a long ride, and maybe for nothing. Yes. But then we're two long men. Where do you place that fire, Clint?'

'Hard to tell. Close to Luna's Wells, maybe.'

'Too far west for that,' said Garrett. 'I'd say it was Lost Ranch. We'll go ask questions, anyway. If we was layin' out there with our ribs caved in or our leg broke —— Let's go!'

That is how they came to Lost Ranch between three and four the next morning. A feeble light shone in the window. Clint took

the horses to water, while Garrett went on to the house. He stopped at the outer door. A man lay on a couch within, a man Garrett knew — old Florencio. Folded quilts made a pallet on the floor, and on the quilts lay another man, a man with red hair and a red stubble of beard. Both were asleep. Florencio's hand hung over the couch, and the stranger's hand held to it in a tight straining clasp. Garrett stroked his chin, frowning.

Sudden and startling, a burst of strangled coughing came from the room beyond and a woman's sharp call.

'*Hijo!*' cried Florencio feebly, and pulled the hand he held. 'Happy! Wake up!' The stranger lurched to his feet and staggered through the door. 'Yes, Felix, I'm coming. All right, boy! All right now! Let me see. It won't hurt. Just a minute, now.'

Garrett went into the house.

'Clint,' said Pat Garrett, 'there's folks dyin' in there, and a dead man doin' for them. You

take both horses and light a rag for the Alamogordo Hospital. Diphtheria. Get a doctor and nurses out here just as quick as God will let them come.' Garrett was pulling the saddle from his horse as he spoke. 'Have 'em bring grub and everything. Ridin' turn about, you ought to make it tolerable quick. I'm stayin' here, but there's no use of your comin' back. You might take a look around Jarilla if you want to, but use your own judgment. Drag it, now. Every minute counts.'

A specter came to the doorway. 'Better send a wagonload of water,' it said as Clint turned to go. 'This well is maybe poisoned. Germs and such.'

'Yes, and bedding, too,' said Clint. 'I'll get everything and tobacco. So long!'

'Friend,' said Pat, 'you get yourself to bed. I'm takin' on your job. Your part is to sleep.'

'Yes, son,' Florencio's thin voice quavered joyously. '*Duerme y descansa.* Sleep and rest. Don Patricio will do everything.'

McEwen swayed uncertainly. He looked at

Garrett with stupid and heavy eyes. 'He called you Patricio. You're not Pat Nunn, by any chance?'

'Why not?' said Garrett.

McEwen's voice was lifeless. 'My father used to know you,' he said drowsily. He slumped over on his bed.

'Who was your father?' said Garrett.

McEwen's dull and glassy eyes opened to look up at his questioner. 'I'm no credit to him,' he said. His eyes closed again. 'Boil the water!' said McEwen.

'He's asleep already!' said Pat Garrett. 'The man's dead on his feet.'

'Oh, Pat, there was never one like him!' said Florencio. He struggled to his elbow, and looked down with pride and affection at the sprawling shape on the pallet. 'Don Patricio, I have a son in my old age, like Abrahán!'

'I'll pull off his boots,' said Pat Garrett.

Garrett knelt over McEwen and shook him vigorously. 'Hey, fellow, wake up! You,

Happy — come alive! Snap out of it! Most sundown, and time you undressed and went to bed.'

McEwen sat up at last, rubbing his eyes. He looked at the big, kindly face for a little in some puzzlement. Then he nodded.

'I remember you now. You sent your pardner for the doctor. How's the sick folks?'

'I do believe,' said Pat, 'that we're going to pull 'em through — every one. You sure had a tough lay.'

'Yes. Doctor come?'

'He's in sight now — him and the nurses. That's how come me to rouse you up. Feller, I hated to wake you when you was going so good. But with the ladies comin', you want to spruce yourself up a bit. You look like the wrath of God!'

McEwen got painfully to his feet and wriggled his arms experimentally.

'I'm just one big ache,' he admitted. 'Who's them fellows?' he demanded. Two men were industriously cleaning up the house; two men that he had never seen.

'Them boys? Monte, the Mexican, he's old Florencio's nephew. Heard the news this mawnin', and comes boilin' out here hell-for-leather. Been here for hours. The other young fellow came with him. Eastern lad. Don't know him, or why he came. Say, Mr. Happy, you want to bathe those two eyes of yours with cold water, or hot water, or both. They look like two holes burned in a blanket. Doc will have to give you a good jolt of whiskey, too. Man, you're pretty nigh ruined!'

'I knew there was something,' said Mr. Happy. 'Got to get me a name. And gosh, I'm tired! I'm a good plausible liar, most times, but I'll have to ask you to help me out. Andy Hightower — how'd that do? Knew a man named Alan Hightower once, over on the Mangas.'

'Does he run cattle over there now somewhere about Quemado?'

'Yes,' said McEwen.

'I wouldn't advise Hightower,' said Garrett.

'My name,' said McEwen, 'is Henry Clay.'

Dr. Lamb, himself the driver of the covered spring wagon, reached Lost Ranch at sundown. He brought with him two nurses, Miss Mason and Miss Hollister, with Lida Hopper, who was to be cook; also, many hampers and much bedding. Dad Lucas was coming behind, the doctor explained, with a heavy wagon, loaded with water and necessaries. Garrett led the way to the sick-room.

Monte helped Garrett unload the wagon and care for the team; Lida Hopper prepared supper in the kitchen.

Mr. Clay had discreetly withdrawn, together with the other man. They were out in the corral now, getting acquainted. The other man, it may be mentioned, was none other than Ben Griggs; and his discretion was such that Miss Hollister knew nothing of his presence until the next morning.

Mr. Clay, still wearied, bedded down under the stars, Monte rustling the credentials for him. When Dad Lucas rolled in, the men made camp by the wagon.

'Well, doctor,' said Garrett, 'how about the sick? They are going to make it?'

'I think the chances are excellent,' said the doctor. 'Barring relapse, we should save every one. But it was a narrow squeak. That young man who nursed them through — why, Mr. Garrett, no one on earth could have done better, considering what he had to do with. Nothing, practically, but his two hands.'

'You're all wrong there, doc. He had a backbone all the way from his neck to the seat of his pants. That man,' said Garrett, 'will do to take along.'

'Where is he, Mr. Garrett? And what's his name? The old man calls him 'son,' and the boys call him 'Uncle Happy.' What's his right name?'

'Clay,' said Garrett, 'Henry Clay. He's dead to the world. You won't see much of him. A week of sleep is what he needs. But you remind me of something. If you will let me, I would like to speak to all of you together. Just a second. Would you mind asking the nurses

to step in for a minute or two, while I bring the cook?'

'Certainly,' said Dr. Lamb.

'I want to ask a favor of all of you,' said Garrett, when the doctor had ushered in the nurses. 'I won't keep you. I just want to declare myself. Some of you know me, and some don't. My name is Pat Garrett, and I am sheriff of Doña Ana County, over west. But for reasons that are entirely satisfactory to myself, I would like to be known as Pat Nunn, for the present. That's all. I thank you.'

'Of course,' said Dr. Lamb, 'if it is to serve the purpose of the law ——'

'I would not go so far,' said Garrett. 'If you put it that my purpose is served, you will be quite within the truth. Besides, this is not official. I am not sheriff here. This ranch is just cleverly over the line and in Otero County. Old Florencio pays taxes in Otero. I am asking this as a personal favor, and only for a few days. Perfectly simple. That's all. Thank you.'

'Did you ask the men outside?'

'No. I just told them,' said Mr. Pat Nunn. 'It would be dishonorable for a lady to tip my hand; for a man it would be plumb indiscreet.'

'Dad Lucas,' said the doctor, 'is a cynical old scoundrel, and a man without principle, and swivel-tongued besides.'

'He is all that you say, and a lot more that you would never guess,' said Garrett. 'But if I claimed to be Humpty Dumpty, Dad Lucas would swear that he saw me fall off of the wall.' He held up his two index fingers, side by side. 'Dad and me, we're like that. We've seen trouble together — and there is no bond so close. Again, one and all, I thank you. Meetin's adjourned.'

Lost Ranch was a busy scene on the following day. A cheerful scene, too, despite the blazing sun, the parched desert, and the scarred old house. Reports from the sick-room were hopeful. The men had spread a tarpaulin by the wagon, electing Dad Lucas for cook.

They had salvaged a razor of Florencio's and were now doing mightily with it. Monte and Ben Griggs, after dinner, were to take Dad's team and Florencio's wagon to draw up a jag of mesquite roots; in the meantime Monte dragged up stop-gap firewood by the saddle horn, and Ben kept the horse power running in the water pen. Keeping him company, Pat Garrett washed Henry Clay's clothes. More accurately, it was Pat Nunn who did this needed work with grave and conscientious thoroughness.

'Henry Clay and me, after bein' in the house so long,' said Mr. Nunn, 'why, we'll have to boil up our clothes before we leave, or we might go scattering diphtheria hither and yonder and elsewhere.'

'But how if you take it yourselves?'

'Then we'll either die or get well,' said Mr. Nunn slowly. 'In either case, things will keep juneing along just the same. Henry Clay ain't going to take it, or he'd have it now. It takes three days after you're exposed. Something

like that. We'll stick around a little before we go, just in case.'

'Which way are you going, Mr. Nunn?' asked Ben.

'Well, I'm going to Tularosa. Old Florencio will have to loan me a horse. Clay too. He's afoot. Don't know where he's going. Haven't asked him. He's too worn out to talk much. His horse played out on him out on the flat somewheres and he had to hang up his saddle and walk in. So Florencio told me. He's goin' back and get his saddle to-morrow.'

Miss Mason being on duty, Jay Hollister, having picked up a bite of breakfast, was minded to get a breath of fresh air; and at this juncture she tripped into the water pen where Mr. Nunn and Ben plied their labors.

'And how is the workingman's bride this morning?' asked Ben brightly.

'Great Cæsar's ghost! Ben Griggs, what in the world are you doing here?' demanded Jay with a heightened color.

'Workin',' said Ben, and fingered his blue

overalls proudly. 'Told you I was goin' to work. Right here is where I'm needed. Why, there are only four of us, not counting you three girls and the doctor, to do what this man Clay was doing. You should have seen Monte and me cleaning house yesterday.'

'Yes?' Jay smiled sweetly. 'What house was that?'

'Woman!' said Ben, touched in his workman's pride. 'If you feel that way now, you should have seen this house when we got here.'

'You're part fool. You'll catch diphtheria.'

'Well, what about you? The diphtheria part, I mean. What's the matter with your gettin' diphtheria?'

'That's different. That's a trade risk. That's my business.'

'You're my business,' said Ben.

Jay shot a startled glance at Mr. Nunn, and shook her head.

'Oh, yes!' said Ben. 'Young woman, have you met Mr. Nunn?'

Soap in hand, Mr. Nunn looked up from his

task. 'Good-morning, miss. Don't mind me,' he said. 'Go right on with the butchery.'

'Good-morning, Mr. Nunn. Please excuse us. I was startled at finding this poor simpleton out here where he has no business to be. Have I met Mr. Nunn? Oh, yes, I've met him twice. The doctor introduced him once, and he introduced himself once.'

Mr. Nunn acknowledged this gibe with twinkling eye. Miss Hollister looked around her, and shivered in the sun. 'What a ghastly place!' she cried. 'I can't for the life of me understand why anybody should live here. We came through some horrible country yesterday, but this is the worst yet. Honestly, Mr. Nunn, isn't this absolutely the most God-forsaken spot on earth?'

Mr. Nunn abandoned his work for the moment and stood up, smiling. So this was Pat Garrett of whom she had heard so much; the man who killed Billy the Kid. Well, he had a way with him. Jay could not but admire the big square head, the broad spread of his shoul-

ders, and a certain untroubled serenity in his quiet face.

'Oh, I don't know,' said Mr. Nunn. 'Look there!'

'Where? I don't see anything,' said Jay. 'Look at what?'

'Why, the bees,' said Pat. 'The wild bees. They make honey here. Little family of 'em in every *sotol* stalk; and that old house up there with the end broken in —— No, Miss Hollister, I've seen worse places than this.'

CHAPTER VIII

THE patients were improving. Old Florencio, who had been but lightly touched, mended apace. He had suffered from exhaustion and distress quite as much as from disease itself. Demetrio and little Felix gained more slowly, and Estefanía was weakest of all. The last was contrary to expectation. As a usual thing, diphtheria goes hardest with the young. But all were in a fair way to recover. Dr. Lamb and Dad Lucas had gone back to town. Dad had returned with certain comforts and luxuries for the convalescents.

Jay Hollister, on the morning watch, was slightly annoyed. Mr. Pat Garrett and the man Clay were leaving, it seemed, and nothing would do but that Clay must come to the sick-room for leave-taking. Quite naturally, Jay had not wished her charges disturbed. Peace and quiet were what they needed. But Garrett had been insistent, and he had a way with

him. Oh, well! The farewell was quiet enough and brief enough on Clay's part, goodness knows, but rather fervent from old Florencio and his daughter-in-law. That was the Spanish of it, Jay supposed. Anyhow, that was all over and the disturbers were on their way to Tularosa.

Relieved by Miss Mason, Jay went in search of Ben Griggs to impart her grievance, conscious that she would get no sympathy there, and queerly unresentful of that lack. He was not to be seen. She went to the kitchen.

'Where's that trifling Ben, Lida?'

'Him? I'm sure I don't know, Miss Jay. That Mexican went up on top of the house just now. He'll know, likely.'

Jay climbed the rickety ladder, stepped on the adobe parapet and so down to the flat roof. Monte sat on the farther wall looking out across the plain so intently that he did not hear her coming.

'Do you know where Ben is?' said Jay.

Monte came to his feet. 'Oh, yais! He is

weeth the Señor Lucas to haul wood, Mees Hollister. Is there what I can do?'

'What are we going to do about water?' said Jay. 'There's only one barrel left. Of course, we can boil the well water, but it's horrible stuff.'

'*Prontamente* — queeckly. All set. Ben weel be soon back, and here we go, Ben and me, to the spreeng of San Nicolás.' He pointed to a granite peak of the San Andrés. 'There at thees peenk hill yonder.'

'What, from way over there?'

'Eet ees closest, an ver' sweet water, ver' good.'

Jay looked and wondered, tried to estimate the void that lay between, and could not even guess. 'What a dreadful country! How far is it?'

'Oh, twent-ee miles. *Es nada.* We feel up by sundown and come back in the cool stars.'

'Oh, do sit down,' said Jay, 'and put on your hat. You're so polite you make me nervous. I shouldn't think you'd care much about

the cool,' said Jay, 'the way you sit up here, for pleasure, in the broiling sun.'

'Plezzer? Oh, no!' said Monte. 'Look!' He turned and pointed. 'No, not here, not close by. Mebbe four, three miles. Look across thees bare spot an' thees streep of mesquite to thees long chalk reedge; and now, beyond thees row and bunches of yuccas. You see them now?'

Jay followed his hand and saw, small and remote, two horsemen creeping black and small against the infinite recession of desert. She nodded.

'Eet ees with no joy,' said Monte, 'that I am to see the las' of *un caballero valiente* — how do you say heem? — of a gallan' gentlemen — thees redhead.'

'You are not very complimentary to Mr. Garrett,' said Jay.

'Oh, no, no, no — you do not understand!' Monte's eyes narrowed with both pity and puzzlement. He groped visibly for words. '*Seguramente*, *siempre*, een all ways Pat

Garrett ees a man complete. Eet is known. But thees young fellow — he ees play out the streeng — *pobrecito!* Oh, Mees Jay, eet ees a bad spread! Es-scusame, please, Mees Hollister. I have not the good words — onlee the man talk.'

'Oh, he did well enough — but why not?' said Jay. 'What else could he do?' There has been something all the time that I don't understand. Danger from diphtheria? Nonsense. I am not a bit partial to you people out here. Perhaps you know that. But I must admit that danger doesn't turn you from anything you have set your silly heads to do. Of course Mr. Clay had to work uncommonly hard, all alone here. But he had no choice. No; it's something else, something you have kept hidden from me all along. Why all the conspiracy and the pussyfoot mystery?'

'Eet was not jus' lak that, mees. Not *conjuración* exactlee. But everee man feel for heemself eet ees ver' good to mek no talk of thees theeng.' For once Monte's hands were

still. He looked off silently at the great bare plain and the little horsemen dwindling in the distance. 'I weel tell you, then,' he said at last. 'Thees *cosa* are bes' not spoken, and yet eet ees right for you shall know. Onlee I have not those right words. Ben, he shall tell you when he come.'

Again he held silence for a little space, considering. 'Eet ees lak thees, Mees Jay. Ver' long ago — yais, before not any of your people is cross over the Atlantic Ocean — my people they are here een thees country and they go up and down to all places — yais, to *las playas del mar*, to the shores of the sea by California. And when they go by Zuñi and by thees rock El Morro, wheech your people call — I have forget that name. You have heard heem?'

'Yes,' said Jay. 'Inscription Rock. I've read about it.'

'*Si, si!* That ees the name. Well, eet ees good camp ground, El Morro, wood and water, and thees gr-reat cleef for shade and for shelter een estr-rong winds. And here some fellow he

come and he cry out, "*Adiós, el mundo!* What lar-rge weelderness ees thees! And me, I go now eento thees beeg lonesome, and perhaps I shall not to r-return! *Bueno, pues*, I mek now for me a gravestone!" and so he mek on that beeg rock weeth hees dagger, "*Pasó por aquí, Don Fulano de Tal*" — passed by here, Meester So-and-So — weeth the year of eet.

'And after heem come others to El Morro — so few, so far from Spain! They see what he ees write there, and they say, "*Con razón!*" — eet ees weeth reason to do thees. An' they also mek eenscreepción, "*Pasó por aquí*" — and their names, and the year of eet.'

His hand carved slow letters in the air. His eye was proud.

'I would not push my leetleness upon thees so lar-rge world, but one of thees, Mees Hollister — oh, not of the great, not of the first — he was of mine, my ver' great, great papa. So long ago! And he mek also, "*Pasó por aquí*, Salvador Holguin." I hear thees een the firelight when I am small fellow. And when

I am man-high I mek veesit to thees place and see heem.'

His eye followed the far horsemen, now barely to be seen, a faint moving blur along the north.

'And thees fellow, too, thees redhead, he pass this way, "*Pasó por aquí*"' — again the brown hand wrote in the air — 'and he mek here good and not weeked. But, before that — I am not God!' Lips, shoulders, hands, every line of his face disclaimed that responsibility. 'But he is thief, I theenk,' said Monte. 'Yais, he ees thees one — Mack-Yune? — who rob the bank of Numa Frenger las' week at Belen. I theenk so.'

Jay's eyes grew round with horror, her hand went to her throat. 'Not arrested?'

For once Monte's serene composure was shaken. His eyes narrowed, his words came headlong.

'O, no-no-no! You do not unnerstan'. Ees eemposevilly, what you say! Pat Garrett ees know nozzing, he ees fir-rm r-resolve to know

nozzing. An' thees Mack-Yune, he ees theenk *por verdad* eet ees Pat Nunn who ride weeth heem to Tularosa. He guess not one theeng that eet ees the sheriff. Pat Garrett he go that none may deesturb or moless' heem. Becows, thees young fellow ees tek eshame for thees bad life, an' he say to heemself, "I weel arize and go to my papa."'

She began to understand. She looked out across the desert and the thorn, the white chalk and the sand. Sun dazzle was in her eyes. These people! Peasant, gambler, killer, thief —— She felt the pulse pound in her throat.

'And een Tularosa, all old-timers, everee man he know Pat Garrett. Not lak thees Alamogordo, new peoples. And when thees old ones een Tularosa see Meester Pat Garrett mek good-bye weeth hees friend at the tr-rain, they will theenk nozzing, say nozzing. *Adiós!*'

He sat sidewise upon the crumbling parapet and waved his hand to the nothingness where the two horsemen had been swallowed up at last.

'And him the sheriff!' said Jay. 'Why, they could impeach him for that. They could throw him out of office.'

He looked up smiling. 'But who weel tell?' said Monte. His outspread hands were triumphant. 'We are all decent people.'

'Yes, Monte,' said Jay. Her hand reached out to touch his shoulder. 'Clean people.' She turned and flung out her arms to earth and sky.

'The beautiful world!' said Jay.

THE END

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